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EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION OF PRONUNCIATION LEARNING STRATEGIES AND WORD-STRESS RULES: EXAMINING LEARNERS’ REFLECTIONS FROM DIARY ENTRIES

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Abstract: Pronunciation learning strategies (PLSs) have attracted researchers’ attention with their potential for achieving pronunciation improvement (e.g., Pawlak & Szyszka, 2018). Studies aimed to identify suitable PLSs for learners (Peterson, 2000) and to explore strategy use with different pronunciation features among learners with different L1s (Sardegna, 2022).

The present study focuses on investigating types of strategies used for accurate word stress placement. Twenty Macedonian EFL learners were part of a larger experiment that tested the effectiveness of explicit instruction on four orthographic word-stress rules. During a four week-period, the participants were taught how to identify stress in polysyllabic words, received instruction on PLSs for practice based on Dickerson’s Covert Rehearsal Model (CRM) (Dickerson, 2013), and kept a diary where they recorded their strategy use. The qualitative analysis of the results reveals that most of the participants use prediction and production strategies and turn to online resources and speech models for monitoring their performance.

Keywords: *pronunciation learning strategies (PLSs); word-stress rules; Covert Rehearsal Model (CRM); learner diaries.*

1. Introduction

The status of pronunciation as a vital skill in EFL learning has been recognised by research experts and practitioners in the field. The reality, however, is different as lack of time is usually one of the reasons for the neglect of pronunciation instruction in the classroom. A possible solution to this problem might be the promotion of a more autonomous approach to learning that would equip learners with rules and resources for further practice outside the classroom.

Learning strategies seem to have the potential to direct learners to greater autonomy. Oxford’s (1990) pioneering work on defining and classifying strategies attracted considerable attention and served as a springboard for future research into language learning strategies. The field of pronunciation has benefitted as

well. Oxford's taxonomy has been extended by Peterson (2000) who attempted to describe and identify suitable pronunciation learning strategies (PLSs). This work then paved the way for further research into PLSs among different L1 speakers (e.g., Akyol, 2012; Fang & Lin, 2012; Całka, 2011).

The current study aims to identify strategies used by Macedonian EFL learners for word stress placement. In particular, it focuses on what strategies are applied during practice in the Covert Rehearsal Model (CRM) (Dickerson, 2013; Hahn & Dickerson, 1999) for accurate stress prediction in polysyllabic words as reported by learners using insights from their diary entries. Based on the results, the potential of their use in the classroom is considered.

2. Pronunciation learning strategies

Pronunciation learning can be shaped by several factors, some of which are inherent to the learner, such as age, learning style, and language aptitude, while others can be influenced by the teacher or learner. The latter include the application of effective learning strategies and monitoring skills as well as the adoption of an autonomous approach (Pawlak, 2011); if these are fostered in the classroom, the learners could be equipped with the right set of PLSs and use them for independent practice outside the classroom (Szyszka, 2017). For instance, Szyszka (2015) found out that successful pronunciation learners perceive PLSs as extremely useful and prefer perception strategies, such as listening to the target language, and productive strategies, such as imitating and repeating.

Studies have also investigated the frequency of use of direct and indirect strategies and found that there is a preference for cognitive over metacognitive strategies. Całka (2011) explored what strategies were used by 74 first-year university students in a practical phonetics course. Using a five-point Likert scale questionnaire and an open-ended question to collect data, she found that the predominant cognitive strategy was learning by repeating, while the predominant metacognitive strategy was paying attention to people speaking. Szyszka (2014) conducted a qualitative analysis of PLS chain use in different task types which aimed to improve intelligibility. Twenty first-year EFL college learners took part in semi-structured interviews which focused on the use of PLSs when delivering oral presentations, while another group of 28 learners recorded their pronunciation learning and reflected on strategy use through diary writing. The results revealed that different tasks led to use of different logical sets of PLSs or PLS chains, with cognitive strategies being used the most, followed by memory strategies, and social strategies being used the least.

Another study that employed diaries as a collection tool is Pawlak (2011). In order to gain an understanding of how advanced Polish L2 learners approach pronunciation learning, 60 English majors were asked to keep a diary, either in their mother tongue or English, at least twice a week over a three-month period and note down their course of action while learning. Given prompts for writing, the participants were encouraged to report the steps they took for improving their pronunciation, organising their learning, monitoring their progress and overcoming challenges. Regarding strategy use, the findings revealed that the

participants preferred more traditional cognitive strategies, such as repetition, word transcription and consulting a dictionary. While the majority reported rarely using resources other than the coursebook, some respondents used more creative and diverse strategies, such as paying attention and monitoring performance, as well as highlighting and analysing contrastively. They also appeared to understand that not all strategies can be applied to every task. The author concludes that these findings indicate the potential of strategy use for successful pronunciation learning.

Research has also produced positive findings regarding strategy use during practice in the Covert Rehearsal Model (Dickerson 2013; Hahn & Dickerson 1999). The CRM is a six-step model that involves: 1) finding a quiet place to practise; 2) practising the target feature out loud; 3) listening carefully to and evaluating the production of the target feature; 4) using speech models for comparing the production and identifying potential errors; 5) correcting the production by making necessary adjustments; and 6) practising saying it out loud until achieving fluency. Evidence suggests that the more learners practise autonomously in covert rehearsal, the greater their improvement of the practised feature is after formal instruction has ended (e.g., linking of sounds within words and at word boundaries in Sardegna, 2011). In addition, the choice of strategies seems to make a difference to accuracy in the long run (Sardegna, 2022). Moreover, the investigation into the effectiveness of instruction for the improvement of word stress by the use of three orthographic rules revealed that PLS chains were used moderately (Sardegna & Dickerson, 2023). Twelve graduate students from different academic areas and different L1s participated in a four-month pronunciation course, during which they received feedback continuously and were prompted to apply pedagogical rules for prediction of stress placement when practising in covert rehearsal. Using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire to collect information on the frequency of use of 15 strategies for practising word stress, the authors found that perception strategies were preferred over prediction and production strategies. The perception strategies of listening to speech models and listening to the radio were the most popular, while the prediction strategy of dividing sentences into message units before reading and the production strategy of correcting one's pronunciation of words in private were reported to be equally used.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research question

The research outlined in the previous section provides empirical evidence of successful strategy use. The current study aims to contribute to the understanding of strategy choice by exploring strategy use in CRM by EFL learners with the same L1. The qualitative analysis presented here is part of an experiment that tested the effectiveness of a short teaching intervention on four orthographic word-stress rules and PLSs based on Dickerson's (2013) Prediction, Production, Perception Model. The analysis aims to answer the following research question:

RQ: What learning strategies do Macedonian EFL learners use for word stress placement during their practice in covert rehearsal?

3.2. Participants

Forty Macedonian EFL learners volunteered as participants in the experiment. Only twenty of them were part of the experimental group (n = 20; M = 3, F = 17; M_{age} = 20, age range 19–28) and completed diary entries. They were first-year students majoring in English language at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje and were enrolled in the course Modern English 2 which targets language skills at B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). They all had studied English as a foreign language in primary and secondary school and half of them had studied it in a private language centre as well. Only two participants spent four months on average in an English-speaking country. The participants had no formal knowledge or instruction in English pronunciation prior to the experiment. They were coded as MK01–MK20.

3.3. Procedure and analysis

During a four-week period, the participants received instruction twice a week on the use of four orthographic word-stress rules (Hahn & Dickerson, 1999). In eight 45-minute sessions, the participants were taught how to predict stress placement in polysyllabic words by analysing word endings and identifying the Key Syllable and the Left Syllable. The Key Syllable is positioned at the end of a word or left of an ending, while the Left Syllable is immediately to the left of the Key Syllable.[1] Details of the four rules with example words and how syllables are analysed in these examples are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Types of Stress-rule Patterns and Stressed Syllables*

Type of rule	Stressed syllable		Example
Key Stress Rule (KSR)	Key Syllable	*fall**ac**(ious*	*-(ious* – word ending *-ac* – Key Syllable *-ac* – stressed syllable
Left Stress Rule (LSR)	Left Syllable	*deg**en**er(acy*	*-(acy* – word ending *-er* – Key Syllable *-en* – Left Syllable *-en* – stressed syllable
V/VC Stress Rule (VSR)	1. Stress Left Syllable if Key Syllable is spelled with a V or VC.	*c**omp**et(ency*	*-(ency* – word ending *-et* – Key Syllable *-omp* – Left Syllable *-omp* – stressed syllable
	2. Stress Key Syllable if spelled otherwise.	*adol**esc**(ent*	*-(ent* – word ending *-esc* – Key Syllable *-esc* – stressed syllable

[1] Given that these stress-rule patterns are based on orthography, they presuppose relying on spelling to determine the number of syllables and word endings to find the stressed syllables (Hahn & Dickerson, 1999). Learners should always start from the end of the word and look to the left until they find all adjacent vowel letters which comprise one syllable. Next, learners should continue analysing to the left until the beginning of the word in order to identify all syllables. Once they have identified the syllables based on the word ending and the stress rule that applies, learners should find the stressed syllable, e.g., *fallacious* (-ious = word ending; -ac = Key Syllable; -all = Left Syllable (see Table 1 example).

Prefix Stress Rule (PSR)	1. Stress Left Syllable if the prefix is not part of the Left Syllable.	***arb**itr*(*ary* -*(ary* – word ending -*itr* – Key Syllable *arb* – Left Syllable *arb* – stressed syllable
	2. Stress Key Syllable if otherwise.	*ob**ject***(*ive* -*(ive* – word ending -*ect* – Key Syllable -*ect* – stressed syllable

Note. In the examples the ending is marked with a bracket, the Key Syllable is underlined, the Left Syllable is marked with a wavy underline, and the stressed syllable is in bold.

The intervention also included training in strategy use for practice in covert rehearsal and completion of homework assignments. Eleven strategies (see Table 2) based on Dickerson's 3Ps Model: Prediction, Production, Perception (Dickerson, 2013) were provided to the participants. This model was used as a benchmark for classification because it underlines the connection between orthography and prediction, and, as a result, it aids perception and production. The participants were also taught how to use online resources, such as YouGlish[2], Cambridge Online Dictionary[3], and Vocaroo[4] when applying certain strategies.

Table 2. *Pronunciation Learning Strategies*

Type of strategy	Strategy (description)	Code
Prediction strategies	I analyse the spelling to identify the syllables in a word.	PRE1
	I analyse word endings to identify the Key and Left Syllable in a word.	PRE2
	I use word endings to decide which syllable to stress in a word.	PRE3
Production strategies	I record myself saying polysyllabic words and then compare my own production against that of the model.	PRO4
	I listen to speech models and imitate their pronunciation of a word.	PRO5
	I read aloud a word several times and pay attention to which syllable is the loudest.	PRO6
	I read aloud sentences/passages with the target word.	PRO7
	I use the target word in a sentence.	PRO8
Perception strategies	I listen to speech models (online tools/recorded material/native speakers).	PER9
	I listen to recorded material to identify the stressed syllables in words.	PER10
	I highlight or underline the stressed syllable in a word.	PER11

[2] https://youglish.com/

[3] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/

[4] https://vocaroo.com/

Throughout the intervention period, the participants had to complete seven homework assignments. They were also asked to keep a diary and report their strategy use after homework completion either in English or Macedonian. Each diary entry was sent to the instructor who gave feedback and assisted when necessary. These diary entries comprised the corpus of this study. Diaries as data collection tools come with their own advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, they allow access into information not generally available through other research techniques and help promote greater awareness in learners of their strategy use. On the other hand, lack of guidance can lead to reporting random information which may not even include strategy use (Cohen, 2014). To ensure the participants included relevant information in their entries, they were given question prompts which guided learners to reflect on their learning process before the start of the practice and after completing practice and the homework task (Table 3).

Table 3. *Prompts for Directing Participants' Reflection on Strategy Use Before and After Practice*

Before practice	After practice and homework
1. What did you learn in class today/ yesterday?	1. What have you learned?
2. What was the objective?	2. Have you made any errors? Why do you think you have made them?
3. Did you find it easy or difficult to understand?	3. How have you learned that?
4. How are you going to organise your learning process? Which strategies are you going to use?	4. Which strategies have you used?
	5. How much time have you spent practising?

The obtained qualitative data was analysed using thematic category analysis which consisted of identifying the most commonly reported strategy clusters, strategy preferences as well as other common topics, such as favourite online tools and challenges faced during practice in covert rehearsal.

4. Results

Although the participants' diary entries varied in length, most of them provided substantial evidence regarding their strategy use and learning experience in covert rehearsal. Only a few participants ($n = 4$; 20%) included scant information in this respect. The majority (n = 16; 80%) provided detailed descriptions and demonstrated good organisational skills. Overall, the participants reported that they were satisfied with this new approach to learning, as illustrated by participant MK03: "… I actually enjoyed this course and the new way of learning. I can really notice improvement in my pronunciation which it [*sic*] makes me very happy."

With respect to strategy use, the most common preferences were the prediction and production strategies. All but one participant reported analysing word endings to identify the Key and Left Syllable in a word (PRE2: n = 19; 95%), and the vast majority reported using word endings to decide which syllable to stress in a

word (PRE3: *n* = 14; 70%). Half of the participants mentioned analysing spelling to identify the syllables in a word (PRE1: *n* = 10; 50%). These were generally reported in combination with a production strategy. The production strategy of recording oneself saying polysyllabic words and then comparing their production against that of a model (PRO4: *n* = 15; 75%) was the most common choice from this category. Fewer participants reported listening to speech models and imitating their pronunciation of a word (PRO5: *n* = 12; 60%) or reading aloud a word several times and paying attention to the most prominent syllable (PRO6: *n* = 8; 40%). Their comments demonstrate the strategy clusters they employed during practice, as illustrated in the following representative excerpts[5]: "Then I started analysing the word endings in our homework, then I applied the key stress rule pattern, which then led me to the key and left syllables. I then recorded myself saying the words aloud with Vocaroo, and then to check if I'd said them correctly, I listened [to] the way they are pronounced on the Cambridge English dictionary website. I spent around an hour and 10 minutes doing the homework and going through the lesson." (MK05), or "I learnt that by being able to find the key and left syllable you are able to predict where the word is stressed. The only errors I have noticed are the ones I made in the markings, that is, switching the underlines of the key and left syllable… As for the pronunciation of the assigned words, I mostly used YouGlish and HowJSay for "nauseation" and compared recordings of my pronunciation to the ones the websites recommended." (MK10), and "Today I began by going over the lesson material once, then I practiced analysing words by identifying the key syllable and left stress rule. After that I did the assigned homework and practiced pronouncing the words from the homework tasks. I checked my pronunciation on Youglish and Google. On Youglish I compared my pronunciation to that of a native speaker, and on Google I used a feature which allows you to check your pronunciation by recording yourself saying the word. I spent about 40 minutes practicing." (MK16)

The perception strategies were not the participants' first choice as well as some production strategies. Less than half listened to speech models only without comparing or imitating (PER9: *n* = 7; 35%). Listening to recordings to identify the stressed syllable (PER10: *n* = 4; 20%), or highlighting/underlining the stressed syllable in a word (PER11: *n* = 3; 15%) were only mentioned sporadically. Of the production strategies less frequently used, participants reported using reading aloud sentences/passages with the target word (PRO7: *n* = 2; 10%) and using the target word in a sentence (PRO8: *n* = 2; 10%) . However, all of these were usually used in combination with the most frequently reported clusters mentioned above, as evidenced in the following excerpts: "For this assignment, I successfully used a couple of strategies. I firstly separated the V/VC rule endings and then I identify [*sic*] the key and left syllables. Finally, in order to find the stress [*sic*] syllable I analysed the key syllable pattern and marked the stress. Afterwards I listen [*sic*] to the pronunciation of the words on "Youglish". [I] [f]ocused on British

[5] In the excerpts, relevant terms such as Key Syllable and Left Syllable are at times used with lower case letters as originally written by the participants. The same applies for YouGlish (written as Youglish) and YouTube (written as Youtube).

pronunciation. And after hearing a couple of times how the word is pronounced by a native speaker, I recorded myself and then compared my recording with the pronunciation of the native speaker. It took me around an hour to finish the assignment." (MK04), and "First, I'm going to record myself pronouncing the words without practicing, then I'm going to use the Google dictionary and [Y]outube videos where these words are pronounced and compare those pronunciations to the ones I've recorded. After the comparison, I'm going to listen to the pronunciation to each word a few times and say it immediately after each hearing. Finally, when I'm done with that, I'm going to think of sentences, write them down and practice pronouncing the key words in a sentence structure. At the end I'll do the final recording of me reading those sentences. (After practice) This was useful. I've noticed that I'm much more aware of the pronunciation of the key words and I'm better at it in comparison to the other words I've used in the sentence. I might have made some errors in the pronunciation even of the words. I've practiced for hour and a half." (MK15)

The data also provided evidence about the most preferred strategy as well as the level of improvement and satisfaction the participants believed to have achieved. In particular, after a few lessons, once they appeared to have familiarised themselves with practice in covert rehearsal, the participants selected strategies that were beneficial for them and used them for almost all homework assignments. They also reported feeling content with their progress as they advanced through the course. They mentioned being able to transfer acquired knowledge to subsequent lessons and navigate through the course more easily. Almost half of the participants (n = 9; 45%) made such comments, for instance: "I've found that revising the lesson material and then practicing pronouncing the words while comparing my pronunciation with that of a native works the [*sic*] best for me" (MK16) or "I can say that after every homework it gets easier and easier because everything is related and we are just building [on] our knowledge more and more" (MK08).

Some participants made specific comments about their learning experience and the challenges they faced in covert rehearsal. These participants (n = 6; 30%) pinpointed specific areas of difficulty, such as "finding the Key Syllable" (MK01), "two vowel letter [*sic*] representing one syllable" (MK17), or "the VSR rule was confusing to me" (MK18). In the comments, they provide details on how they plan on tackling these challenges to make their practice more efficient, as described by participant MK09: "For improvement in my next practice, I think it's a good idea to use the production strategy of recording myself saying polysyllabic words before comparing my production against the speech model. That way, I'll have a better understanding of which errors I've made during the process and whether they are still present in the last recording after I've tried fixing the error."

Another topic detected in the diary entries was a general positive attitude towards using online tools. The participants observed that this approach was practical, useful, and straightforward; they could easily search for words and listen to the pronunciation of more complex words. The most popular choice of online tools were YouGlish, Cambridge Online Dictionary, and Vocaroo.

Although most of the participants seemed able to identify suitable strategies and apply them appropriately, a few participants (n = 4, 20%) appeared to have problems with practice in covert rehearsal and strategy use. Their diary entries consisted mainly of narration of the lesson material and demonstrated inability to report strategy use. This causes concern because the participants received guidance and feedback throughout the whole course about their homework assignments and written reports. These participants would either: 1) mention applying exactly the same strategy for all task types; 2) fail to provide clear description of their learning process; 3) believe that being in a quiet room is a strategy; or 4) report not using or needing any strategy at all for task completion.

With regard to the feedback they received, the majority of participants showed appreciation of the instructor's advice and involvement as a facilitator in their learning process, as pointed out by participant MK17: "I really enjoy this type of homework and would love to see more of this kind, because I really feel like the professor listens [to] /reads all of our diaries and she is deeply interested in our growth of knowledge which I really appreciate and look up to [*sic*]."

5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to give an overview of PLSs used by learners during their practice in covert rehearsal for accurate prediction of stress placement in polysyllabic words. It also intends to provide insights into their thought processes of the new learning experience. The results revealed that there was a preference for prediction and production strategies over perception strategies. These findings are contrary to what Sardegna and Dickerson (2023) observed about their participants, who selected perception strategies more often than prediction and production strategies. A possible explanation for this might be that the participants in the present study had no background in formal pronunciation instruction or any pronunciation knowledge, and they appeared to have relied on word endings to identify syllables, as well as online resources to compare and improve their performance. It seems that the prediction strategies provided participants with a step-by-step approach for stress prediction, while the production strategies enabled them to easily spot mistakes in their own performance, which might have been a mitigating factor in their learning practice. More research is needed to corroborate these findings.

With respect to the choice of specific strategies, the participants mostly used word endings to identify the Key and Left Syllable and the stressed syllable (PRE2 and PRE3) and recorded themselves saying words and then compared their production against a model (PRO4). On the other hand, some strategies, for instance, using words in a target sentence, were very rarely used. Such avoidance of strategies that involve greater cognitive load and are more time-consuming accompanied by use of combinations of more active strategies involving repetition or imitation for facilitated learning has also been documented by other studies (Szyszka, 2015). In addition, the analysis of the participants' diary entries showed that in some instances the same PLS chain was reported to be used for all task types. This can be problematic because repeated strategy use might point towards a failure to apply a strategy effectively as the learner makes multiple attempts to

check if a particular strategy works (Cohen, 2014). Nevertheless, the majority varied their choice of PLSs according to the task type and applied PLS chains appropriately, which is in line with observations from written reports by Polish EFL learners (Szyszka, 2014). The participants in our study also reported employing online resources when practising in covert rehearsal. This can be explained by the CRM promoting the use of resources for correcting one's performance to match the target pronunciation. The use of tools and speech models lends weight to instruction under CRM and has been found to be one of the important instructional variables that mediate learning (Sardegna, 2022).

These findings indicate important implications. First, the CRM has enormous potential for promoting autonomy and practice outside the EFL classroom. To aid practice, learners should be first familiarised with the model and then given training into strategy use aided with prescriptive rules and resources. Given that learners practise independently, instruction of the target feature can be succinct without consuming much classroom time. This leaves room for focusing on other language skills in the EFL classroom without overlooking pronunciation instruction. Secondly, the choice of the target feature and practice model should determine the choice of strategies as different language systems require different strategies (Pawlak, 2019). Hence, the teacher should select an appropriate set of strategies that eases learning in covert rehearsal as well as provide examples in class before independent practice takes place. Finally, diaries should be exploited as reflection tools in a way that learners are self-motivated to contemplate on their learning process and can build awareness of what course of action works best for them.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to perform a qualitative analysis of written reports recording strategy use for stress placement prediction in covert rehearsal. The results revealed that the majority of the participants used a variety of PLSs, online tools and resources when engaging in practice, and appreciated receiving feedback on their progress. Several implications arising from these findings can be applied in the EFL classroom and provide a solution to the common problem of overlooking pronunciation instruction due to lack of time.

Few limitations were observed in the study. For instance, the diary entries were of different lengths as some participants wrote detailed and lengthy accounts, while others provided brief descriptions. Providing prompts to guide the reflection process can remedy the situation; future research might consider other ways of generating input without limiting the reporting of strategy use as this might discourage learners from cooperating (Cohen, 2014). Furthermore, the current study only provided a qualitative analysis of the use of PLSs without measuring its effectiveness. Given that reported frequency of use does not always entail quality (Cohen, 2014), further research can focus on measuring quantitatively successful strategy use for word stress placement.

Despite these limitations, the study provides insight into what PLSs are used by Macedonian EFL learners during their practice in the CRM and demonstrates

the need for integrating training on strategy use in the classroom. The benefits of such practice can be twofold: aiding the learning process and promoting more confident and autonomous learners.

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