“7 and 7”

Self-efficacy of pronunciation and learning of English among a group of 2nd-graders

Bachelor’s thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract Vieraan kielen opiskelua aloittaessa asenteet voivat ennustaa menestystä. Minäpystyvyys kuvaa oppilaan uskoa kykyihinsä ja mahdollisuuksiinsa voittaa edessä olevat haasteet. Tässä tutkielmassa selvitettiin ensimmäistä kertaa vierasta kieltä opiskelevien toisluokkalaisten minäpystyvyyttä englannin ääntämisen ja sen oppimisen suhteen osana Niilo Mäki Instituutin kielten varhentamisen kärkihanketta Kielitaito kuuluu kaikille. Tutkielmaa varten kerättiin numeerista dataa, jonka analyysin perusteella voidaan esittää äännetietoisuutta korostavan intervention selvästi kohottavan oppilaiden minäpystyvyyttä englannin ääntämisen suhteen. Interventio vaikuttaisi parantavan minäpystyvyyttä myös oppimisen suhteen. Vaikuttaa siltä, että NMI:n äännetietoisuuden taitoja tukeva interventio on hyvä työkalu käytettäväksi vieraan kielen opiskelua aloitettaessa.	
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1. Introduction

The current thesis is a part of a larger project coordinated by the Niilo Mäki Institute (later NMI) called Kielitaito kuuluu kaikille (Kielitaito kuuluu kaikille 2019). This larger project aimed at identifying ways to raise phonetic awareness in Finnish pre-schoolers as well as 1st and 2nd grade pupils, and finding methods of helping pupils, especially those with dyslexia, in learning to recognise and produce new phonemes which are absent from their native language. The target group of the project being young pupils, it was thought that, in addition to measuring their actual development in the recognition and production of English phonemes, a view to their self-efficacy was also warranted. In addition to the current study, at least one Master's thesis was produced as a part of the NMI project, the Halmemies and Savolainen (2019) thesis titled *Pirates and Pronunciation: English consonant production skills of Finnish-speaking second-graders knowing no English.*

The teaching methods in the project relied heavily on play. Different kinds of exercises were used ranging from phoneme recognition (listening) and production, sometimes with the aid of a hand mirror, to singing and kinaesthetic games. Usually a lesson covered two phonemes which often were a voiced-unvoiced pair. An important part of the lessons was connecting the phonemes to a real-world object or thing – what makes this sound? – to ease recollection. Every lesson started with learning a couple of English phrases (e.g. Good morning! What's your name?), which for many of the pupils were the first phrases of a foreign language they learned. Beginning from the second lesson, the first part also included a quick recap of the previous class. After the NMI project the teaching material used in the intervention was made available on the NMI website (NMI 2019b).

The current study takes a closer look at self-efficacy regarding the pronunciation of English among pupils who have not received any formal education in this language. Starting a new language is exciting but it can be stressful, too. A person with low self-efficacy may see difficult tasks as threats, while those with high self-efficacy are able to focus on the task rather than any difficulty they may have carrying it out, and to continue even if they fail (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011: 16). The general aim of the current study is to find out how 2nd graders view themselves and their skill – that is to say, their self-efficacy – with regard to the production and identification of certain English consonant phonemes, and to their ability to learn these going forward.

The hypothesis of the current study is that the subjects' reported self-efficacy levels will dive from a high initial value but is likely to bounce back towards the end of the teaching intervention. The

bounce-back effect may happen if the pupils learn to pay attention to the relevant parts of the lessons. Then again, the change might be a constant downward trend, or there might not be significant changes. Initially, it is assumed, most of the pupils are likely to have quite a high level of self-efficacy.

2. Background

2.1. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, or a person's own view of their skill and capability, is linked to realised ability, but this does not mean that a highly confident pupil would necessarily be a very able one. On the other hand, a higher self-efficacy does contribute to better performance at a given skill level. According to Bandura (1997: 37), the skills one has are not as important to perceived self-efficacy, as what one believes one can accomplish with the skills one has.

As the current study seeks to find out the subject group's self-efficacy in the pronunciation of English phonemes and of learning new ones, the relevant sub-skills for the pupils are recognition and re-production of the phonemes in question, as well as their ability, in general, to learn. As Bandura (1997: 37-38) explains, efficacy in a few sub-skills does not comprehensively predict a subject's beliefs concerning a skill. Thus, even if a learner has been quick to recognize new phonemes and proficiently produced them in class, when asked how confident they are of their correct pronunciation or of learning new English phonemes, they may consider the matter in a wider perspective that may cover other aspects of language learning. The fact that the subject group of the current study are very young 2nd grade pupils is likely to lessen this impact, though.

Self-efficacy has not been very extensively studied in the context of foreign language learning. Self-efficacy is noted as an important part of language learning, though, and even material packages specifically for boosting students' self-efficacy have been developed (e.g. Joensuu 2020). In discussing the Finnish school system, Joensuu (2020: 19-20), notes that the core curriculum aims for students to have a strong sense of efficacy and that boosting their self-efficacy in learning English strengthens their efficacy in the whole school system.

Faber (2020) studied the effect on self-efficacy of the completion of a single grammar task among German 5th and 6th graders, the younger group having received formal EFL education for about 6 months. In this setting self-efficacy data was gathered after showing the participants an English grammar task and again right after completion of the task before any correct answers were revealed

(Faber 2020: 7). Here, different changes were observed depending on grade level, gender and task performance. It was found that among 5th grade participants the completion of the task lowered self-efficacy, especially for males, while among 6th graders the effect was opposite. Faber (ibid.: 14) also posits that more attention should be given to analyses of repeated measurements in self-efficacy research in the EFL context.

While some self-efficacy research in the EFL context has been carried out and the self-efficacy construct receives more attention in research (Faber 2020: 2), it seems that there is a research gap in early phoneme acquisition among very young pupils. Self-efficacy research often seems to also lack empirical results concerning task-completion effects (ibid.). While the current study does not evaluate the subjects' self-efficacy on a task-by-task or exercise-by-exercise level, the evaluation is carried out on a lesson-by-lesson level for a length of eight lessons, hopefully contributing useful data to the field even if on a slightly less detailed level.

2.2. Phonological challenges of English for Finnish learners

The phonemes to be practiced during the intervention project had been selected before the current study was begun. The selection had been carried out during the preparation of the teaching material package at the NMI, especially concentrating on phonemes that are absent in the Finnish language, but in such a way that these could be contrasted with phonemes that are familiar to the participants, e.g. /θ/ - /t/ or /w/ - /v/.

According to Peacock (2005: 2-3) the consonants are the part of English pronunciation that it makes sense to train, because their pronunciation is the same worldwide, while the pronunciation of vowels differs strongly, thus rendering the exact reproduction of the vowels (of a chosen accent) a less useful skill. According to Tergujeff (2013: 19-21), RP English has almost twice as many consonant phonemes as Finnish, 24 vs 13 (+3 for many speakers) respectively. Peacock (2005: 4) identifies the sibilants as especially difficult for Finnish speakers of English, while others (e.g. Tergujeff 2013: 22) also lists affricates and dental fricatives as difficult. Halmemies and Savolainen (2019: 32-33) note that as the fricative /s/ is often the only sibilant in Finnish, which allows for large variation in its phonetic realization. This variation without differentiation of meaning permits less precision in pronunciation and in hearing. In Finnish it is enough to hear some kind of sibilant in a word; it doesn't really matter which kind is heard. Conversely, in English their differences are meaningful; they cause variations of meaning. This may lead to difficulties for Finnish learners of English, especially if they have not been accustomed to hearing English.

Tergujeff (2013: 23) also points out the problems caused to L1 Finnish speakers by the irregular spelling conventions of the English language. As the Finnish orthography has a 1-to-1 grapheme-sound correlation, a phonemic transcription of English might help to remediate these problems. While this might not help in the actual production of the phonemes themselves, it could help the speaker to use the correct phoneme in the correct place.

A more detailed view into the differences of the Finnish and English consonant systems can be found in Halmemies and Savolainen (2019: 37-43), which examines the NMI intervention project from the pronunciation point of view.

3. Aim and research questions

The aim of the current study is to find out how second graders view themselves and their skills with regard to the pronunciation of and ability to learn English. There are two main questions that the current study endeavours to answer:

1. *Does the participants' self-efficacy regarding their ability to learn English phonemes change with their first introduction to formal language education?*
2. *How does the participants' self-efficacy regarding the pronunciation of English develop over a phonemic awareness intervention?*

What the current study endeavours to achieve is a better understanding of how second-graders feel they succeed in the pronunciation of previously unknown phonemes and, especially, whether their views change with the introduction to formal language education.

Understanding the pupils' self-efficacy is important. Basically, pupils (and people in general) who believe in themselves are more likely to succeed. Thus, it is good to know if the pupils' beliefs are constant or not; and if not, which direction the changes take and what could be done to increase their confidence.

It is not easy to know what the results of a study like this will be. On one hand, at the time of the data collection in 2017, Finnish 2nd graders had not received any formal language education (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014 2014: 127), and thus were not used to listening for the English phonemes that the current study, and significantly the intervention project that the study is a part of, is concerned with. For this reason, it makes sense to expect low levels of self-efficacy especially in the pre-measure. Then again, the current study is not concerned with actual

ability, which is a separate concept. Reported self-efficacy can very well be high, even if ability is not.

On the other hand, precisely because the participants are 2nd graders and do not have the experience, and because they are so young, they are likely to believe in their own abilities. This means very high marks on self-efficacy especially at the beginning. It is possible that the level diminishes as the intervention goes on. It is also possible that it may bounce back as the pupils learn to pay attention to relevant content during the lessons. Conversely, at least some pupils may feel out of their depth, reporting low or decreasing levels of self-efficacy, as the study progresses.

The working hypothesis is that most pupils' self-efficacy is at a high level at the beginning. From there on, it may turn downwards, but a likely scenario is that most pupils will also report high levels at the end.

4. Data and methods

The study is a part of a phonemic awareness intervention organized by the Niilo Mäki Institute for a group of second-graders. The intervention comprises eight lessons during nine weeks. The study group consists of two classes of about 20-25 pupils each.

Data for the larger project is collected before, during and after the intervention. The pre- and post-measurements use the same set of 24 questions, while the data from during the intervention concentrates on only two questions.

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study were the pupils of two elementary school classes, one class having 21 pupils, and the other 25. Some pupils were excluded from the final analysis based on their absences during either the pre- or post-measurements, or multiple absences during the intervention. Thus, the final number of participants was 44, 14 of which were girls and 30 boys. Being 2nd grade classes, the pupils ranged from 6 to 8 years old. In this municipality, English, as the first foreign language, was introduced at the third grade at the time of data collection. This means that the pupils had not previously learned English in a formal setting.

4.2. The teaching experiment / intervention

The experiment, or phoneme awareness intervention, concentrated on teaching the phonemes /t/, θ, ð, /z/, ʃ, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /s/, /w/, and /v/. Every phoneme had an item or an animal associated with it, which were selected so that they would sound like these phonemes. Some were more successful than others, but, overall, the associations seemed quite fitting.

The teaching experiment was carried out as eight roughly 45-minute lessons, one lesson per week, on Friday mornings. The lessons had a common theme of a pirate adventure with exercises branded as *Hook, Parrot, etc.* tasks.

A typical lesson began with greetings – in English, once learned at the beginning – and a Map task, where a route was drawn on a map from the previous lesson's *flag* (a marker on the map) to this week's flag. Here, the teacher also named this flag (or island, if the flag was on its own small island on the map) as *pump, fly, snake,* etc. flag or island, using the things associated with the phonemes. Next, a few phrases were learned ranging from *Hello* and *Bye-bye* to *My name is…* and to colours and numbers, as the experiment went along. This phase consisted of a basic PPP method, and was carried out relatively quickly. The phrases were left on a wall in the classroom for the pupils to practice when they had time.

After the new phrases, there was a short revision of what had happened the previous week; which phonemes (and items associated with them) were introduced, and how these were produced. The length of the revision phase varied somewhat dependent on how many or how difficult new phonemes had been learned during the previous lesson. Sometimes the phonemes from two previous sessions were revised.

After the revision, it was time to learn new phonemes, usually two of them. At this point the associated items or things were introduced as pictures and as a recording of that (item's) sound. Then the production of these phonemes was taught and practiced, often with mirrors. This also included a song that incorporated the phonemes. The same song was used throughout the experiment, and the phoneme in it was swapped from one to another.

Every lesson also had some kinaesthetic exercises which differed from lesson to lesson, so the classes did not become repetitive. This is congruent with the Finnish elementary school Core Curriculum, which states that there lots of space in language learning for play and creativity (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014 2014: 127). After all the exercises the class

decided to which flag or island their adventure would take them next, pointing it out on the map, and the lesson was concluded. At the very end, Phase 2 self-efficacy data was collected.

4.3. Data collection

Data was collected in three phases. Phase 1 was on the day before the intervention began, phase two during the intervention, and Phase 3 one week after the last intervention lesson. Phases 1 and 3 were identical: in these phases, the pupils answered a 24-question questionnaire. Phase 2 data collection took place at the end of each of the teaching intervention classes.

During the intervention, the pupils sat (when not carrying out a kinaesthetic exercise) at their own places, presumably assigned by their teacher. For the first half of the intervention, these sitting arrangements in the two classrooms were different: in classroom A, the desks were arranged in a right-angled horseshoe formation, whereas in classroom B they were arranged in groups, with four or five desks per group. After a few weeks, the desk arrangement in classroom A was changed into a similar group arrangement as classroom B had from the beginning. The pupils answered their questionnaires at their own desks.

In all phases, the pupils had answer sheets without questions: the sheets only contained the numbered boxes – either boxes with a 1 and a 2, or a seven-step Likert scale - which were differentiated by a variety of symbols at the beginning of each line. The questions were read aloud, taking care to always mention the symbol denoting which line to answer. All questions were also read twice. Going through Phase 1 took slightly less than a whole 45-minute lesson for each class. In Phase 2, the data was collected in about 3 minutes after each session. Phase 3 measurement was easily carried out in half an hour per class, as the pupils were familiar with the answering technique.

There were only minor problems with the data collection. In Phases 1 and 3, one of these was that while the pupils were instructed to concentrate on their own work and, especially, not to repeat the words or sounds out loud, most of them would still say them out loud. Perhaps this could have been avoided by very clear instruction that they are *not allowed* to repeat, instead of *not having to*, but, in the end, this was deemed a minor problem. A more serious threat was possibly forgetting to collect any Phase 2 data at all at the end of an intensive lesson. Fortunately, this was avoided.

Naturally, dealing with 2nd grade pupils, there were also some absences. Each week, from one to a maximum of seven pupils was absent. This makes for an absence rate of 2.2 to 15.2 per cent. Only a

few participants had to be omitted from the analysis, though, as only some pupils were absent more than once.

Phase 2 data collection was carried out by asking the pupils the same two questions at the end of each intervention session. These questions were:

1. How sure are you that you can correctly pronounce English?
2. How sure are you that you will learn new English phonemes?

The questions remained the same throughout the study, even though, after a few lessons, the pupils clearly grew tired of answering the exact same questions every time. Looking back, it might have been good to at least have a different wording sometimes. It is possible that in addition to the two questions here, being asked, for example, three questions that would be different every time would keep the pupils more interested in answering. As it was, towards the end some answers were given before the questions had been asked: *"I already know what I'm going to answer. It's 7 and 7."* This, perhaps, speaks to how confident these young pupils were in their ability.

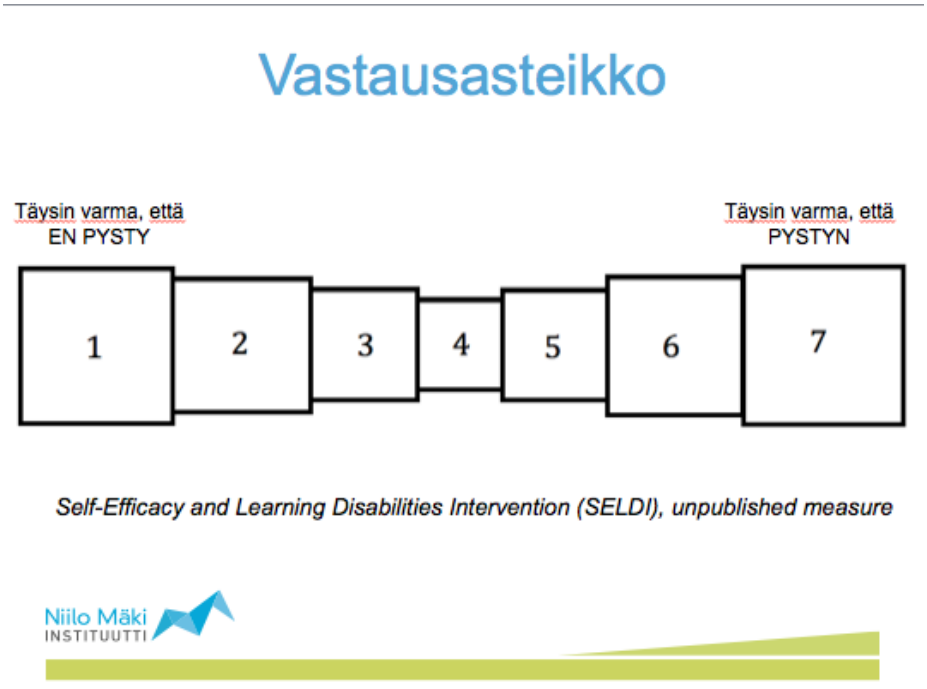

Figure 1: Model for the Phase 2 data collection scale

In the data collection, an unpublished seven-step Likert scale measure was used. This was adapted from the measure used in the University of Jyväskylä and NMI's SELDI (Self-Efficacy and Learning Disabilities Intervention) project (Figure 1).

4.4. Analysis

The collected data is numerical and it was analysed quantitatively. Having been collected on sheets with Likert scales, the data was input into Excel and SPSS, which were used in the analysis. The purpose of the analyses was to look for trends: did the levels of self-efficacy change, and if so, in what direction.

The data was analysed by means of descriptive statistics, presenting mean values for self-efficacy in the pre-measure and post-measure. Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was used to test whether the possible differences in self-efficacy between the pre- and post-measures were statistically significant. Wilcoxon signed ranks was chosen because it is a non-parametric test suitable for small sample sizes, such as the dataset in the current study.

5. Results

5.1. Self-efficacy of the correct pronunciation of English

The self-efficacy regarding the correct pronunciation of English that the participants reported at the beginning of the intervention was generally quite high, considering that this intervention was their first contact with formal foreign language education. Only a few students reported a very low value, while quite a few reported high and maximum values. Overall, the pre-measure mean score was quite close to, if somewhat above, the middle of the Likert scale used, at 4.62. This is not quite in line with the hypothesis of high initial values.

The post-measure mean was significantly higher, at 6.24. This means the participants' self-efficacy of correct pronunciation of English grew during the intervention period. While at the beginning ten participants (approx. 24%) reported an average or below average self-efficacy, only three participants reported a self-efficacy of below 6 on the 7-step scale at the end of the intervention period, and only one of these was below 4.

The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test result gives a Z value of -4.197 and p value of 0.000, meaning the finding is statistically significant.

Table 1: Self-efficacy of correct pronunciation of English

Pre-measure mean	Post-measure mean	*Z*	*p*
4.62	6.24	-4.197	.000

Interestingly, once reached, the high levels of self-efficacy generally seem to be kept through the rest of the intervention. No one lesson seems to have had an especially negative impact on the generally reported levels: while the reported mean after each lesson is not always higher than all the previous ones, there is clearly a rising trend in the reported self-efficacy.

5.2. Self-efficacy of learning ability

At first it was noticed that the pupils' self-efficacy was markedly high in the pre-measurement. Most of the children were sure that they could learn English phonemes, even if they had never been formally taught the language. Only three reported a self-efficacy of below 6 in the pre-measure, which left little room for improvement. This is in line with an initial hypothesis of young children's high self-efficacy prior to the beginning of the intervention. In the post-measure, only six participants reported anything below the maximum of 7, four of these reporting 6 and two reporting 4. Interestingly, both pupils who reported a final 4 started out with very high levels, the reported level only dropping in the latter part of the intervention or for the very last measurement.

A pre-measure mean of 6.64 is very high, and while the post-measure mean at 6.76 is higher, the change is not very large. It is a positive change, but with this small number of participants, such a small change cannot prove statistical significance; the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test gives a Z value of only -0.604 and p value of 0.546. In essence, this means that there is no great change in the participant group's self-efficacy over the intervention period – a highly self-efficacious group of young pupils remains just that, highly self-efficacious.

Table 2: Self-efficacy of learning ability

Pre-measure mean	Post-measure mean	*Z*	*p*
6.64	6.76	-.604	.546

6. Discussion and conclusion

The present study aimed at finding out the self-efficacy levels concerning the pronunciation of English of 2nd grade pupils who had not previously had formal foreign language instruction, and the effect that a phoneme awareness/production intervention has on those levels. These findings show a clear increase in self-efficacy after an intervention period. Another aim of the present study was to find out whether the intervention changed the pupils' self-efficacy beliefs toward their ability to learn new English phonemes. A small increase was found, and its non-significance was thought to be due to very high initial efficacy levels and little room for their improvement.

Faber (2020) found differing self-efficacy effects from the completion of a grammar task among 5th and 6th graders, and put forth a conjecture of the 5th grade pupils' lower self-efficacy post-task indicating a more accurate assessment of their actual skill. As this group were in their first year of EFL instruction, they were not very much further along than the participants of the current study. Perhaps the fact that such lowering of self-efficacy levels is lacking overall in the current study is an indication of the different nature of pronunciation and grammar skills. One might surmise that with a grammar task it is clearer for the pupil whether they know the correct answer or not (even if they might guess, too), while the production of certain phonemes is more difficult to judge personally. The fact that, while the recognition and production of new phonemes was intensively practiced during the intervention, it wasn't actually graded, may also have played a part. However, the reason just might lie with the three-year difference in participation in education in general between the participants of the current study and those of Faber's.

Overall, with the large number of new phonemes that were taught during the intervention, some of them difficult for Finnish speakers of English, it may be somewhat surprising how high the reported self-efficacy levels were. While quite a few participants initially reported middling levels with regard to their pronunciation ability, these quickly rose to very high or maximum levels. What is more, once reached, these higher levels were kept with very few exceptions. It seems impossible to even guess at which phonemes were taught on which lessons, based on the self-efficacy data reported lesson by lesson, so it would seem even the sibilants, affricates and dental fricatives specifically mentioned as difficult for Finns in phonological research (Tergujeff 2013) and study materials especially aimed for Finnish learners (Peacock 2005) were seen as easy to master by these second-graders.

The self-efficacy of learning ability, on the other hand, was consistently reported at high levels from the start. This speaks of the participants' strong belief in their abilities, but it should also be noted that the classroom atmosphere during the intervention was very positive and supportive and that a wide variety of different teaching methods were employed. These are likely to have helped the participants believe that they will also be very well taught in the future, and can thus overcome any obstacles they may encounter.

The current study was carried out over a more than two-month period of time with regular contact with the pupils. This ensured a reliable way of following changes in their levels of self-efficacy: rather than looking at the effect of a single task or lesson, the current study took a longer view of the developments over the course of an early language intervention. This, in combination with the stated results, lends reliability to the current study's findings.

There were some challenges to the study. It is difficult to estimate if there was any peer pressure involved in selecting one's answer, but looking at the data it seems likely that this effect has been minimal – although not non-existent, as in one occasion a pupil changed his or her answer after having an initial one commented on by a peer. In this case the first answer was used in the analysis, as the situation and both answers were observed. After this, the pupils were reminded that they should answer according to how they feel and to pay no heed to what anyone else might think. Peer pressure – or more likely simple copying of others' answers – might be somewhat mitigated by changing the seating arrangements, but this might not be conducive to teaching. The benefits would also be questionable, as the pupils would be likely to just use their voice instead of looking at their friend's paper. The pupils also had to be reminded that if they need to change their answers, they should erase their first answer to make it obvious which one they meant in the end.

On a more theoretical note, the very high initial value of the self-efficacy of learning ability did result in a difficulty to show an improvement in its level. It is quite difficult to imagine how this could have been avoided in such a small-scale study, so the current study cannot definitively state that the intervention helped these particular pupils in that regard. Then again, as this was their first contact to foreign language education, it is quite clear that they learned several methods of practicing new phonemes, and are very likely much keener to notice them, too – even those phonemes that were not included in the intervention.

As this was a study conducted with very young participants, it would be interesting to see if the same kinds of results can be achieved with older learners, and with other languages. On the other

hand, it might also be interesting to hear if a very early intervention like the one here has benefits on the longer term, so a comparative study with a group that has taken part in one and a group who has not, might show some results. In the future, it would be interesting to connect a self-efficacy study, such as this, to a study of actual, realised ability of pronunciation as well.

7. Conclusion

The research questions that the current study wanted to answer are:

1. *Does the participants' self-efficacy regarding their ability to learn English phonemes change with their first introduction to formal language education?*
2. *How does the participants' self-efficacy regarding the pronunciation of English develop over a phonemic awareness intervention?*

The first research question of the current study seems, in light of the data, clear-cut. There was no significant change in the participants' self-efficacy. Collecting relevant self-efficacy data throughout the whole of the intervention period and analysing it showed a persistent, high level of self-efficacy that did not significantly change during the intervention. The participants' view of their ability to learn new phonemes remained, with very few exceptions, highly positive.

To answer the second question, the current study inspected the pupils' self-efficacy both before and after, as well as during the intervention. Most importantly, the intervention significantly raised the participants' self-efficacy of the pronunciation of English. The rise was almost two points on a 7-point scale, and there was a rising trend observed during the intervention, so the change was not limited to the pre- and post-measures.

A rise in the students' self-efficacy will aid them overcome possible future difficulties with more confidence, should they encounter them. Especially as the learning of foreign languages is brought to ever-earlier stages of the school system, introducing young pupils to phonemes absent in their mother tongue, helping them recognize these and to learn to produce them should result in their better ability to speak a more native-sounding English more easily. Not only that, it will help in the learning of other languages, too. As shown, an intervention such as this boosts the learners' self-efficacy, and as the teaching material used in the intervention project is readily available from the Niilo Mäki Institute, it is very much recommended for all teachers with similar learner groups to make the best possible use of it.

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