



Institute
Of Continuing
Education &
Professional Studies

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ON **E-LEARNING** *AND* **HIGHER EDUCATION**



VOLUME 12
JAN 2020
ISSN 2229-8223



SIR: Exploring the Significant Role of Phonetics in the Teaching of Pronunciation

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Abstract: Pronunciation is one of the most overlooked aspects of English language teaching, despite the fact that its accuracy is the basis for effective communication in English. Malaysian learners generally encounter challenges in pronouncing English words due to the fact that there are many English phonemes (i.e. 44 phonemes). Hence, this study has developed an essential and practical tool called SIR to help learners pronounce the English words correctly with the aid of phonetic sounds and symbols. SIR stands for 'Say It Right', which is an interactive multimedia software that emphasizes phonetic sounds and symbols from the English phonemes. SIR's novelty lies in its specific focus on commonly mispronounced words in English and the phonological awareness the software introduces into the learner's cognition to facilitate comprehension and production. Taking phonetics as a framework, SIR makes use of the different components of English phonetics in order to apply them in the software. The tool guides learners on the correct pronunciation of English words based on the 44 English phonemes. Since English spelling is not a reliable guide to pronunciation, the phonetic symbols serve as a dependable guide to correct pronunciation.

Keywords: *English language learning, phonetics, pronunciation, SIR*

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation efficacy among foreign and/or second learners depends to a great extent on their ability to acquire sounds discrimination skills and understand how these sounds are perceived and understood at the phonetical and phonological level (Collins & Mees, 2003). The need to communicate effectively and be clearly understood – meaning good and clear pronunciation, has become an increasingly pertinent issue in the context of English language learning in the Malaysian ESL classroom. According to Morley (1991), limited pronunciation skills can undermine not only a learner's communicative ability but also his/her self-confidence, restrict social interaction, and negatively influence estimations of a learner's credibility and abilities. Studies have also indicated that poor pronunciation or heavily-accented English tends to be stigmatized at the workplace, and speakers often reported being discriminated against when it comes to employment and promotion (Derwing, 2003).

SAY IT RIGHT (SIR) is an interactive software, which attempts to introduce learners to the world of phonetics in a fun and engaging atmosphere with a clear focus on self-paced learning. Unlike other interactive software, SIR's novelty lies in its focused activities on commonly mispronounced words in the Malaysian Second Language Speaking context and the pre-activity stage in which the learners are gently immersed in instruction on certain basic phonemes of English found in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The element of student-teacher interaction amid a friendly environment manifests itself readily in the Modeling-Perception Phase when students are free to ask questions to seek further clarification even when the instruction is in progress. To build confidence in the learners, they are required to repeat the phonemes and later individual words after the facilitator correctly. Only when the learners are reasonably comfortable in their understanding of how phonemes work would they then be ready to engage in computer-based pronunciation awareness and enrichment activities in SIR.

This paper seeks to explore the significant role of phonetics in the teaching of pronunciation to learners and how they can benefit from explicit teaching of phonetic symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) chart.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies had been conducted in the past on the importance of English pronunciation in communication (e.g. Shak, Chang, Stephen (2016), who investigated the role of pronunciation in employability among Malaysian graduates; Lee (2008) who carried out an action research on the teaching pronunciation of English by utilising a computer-assisted learning software in an Institute of Taiwan; Farhat and Dzakari (2017) who carried out an experimental study to investigate the effect of computer by using phonetic videos on pronunciation).

It is undeniable that pronunciation is crucially perceived as an important aspect of communication that should be incorporated into language teaching and learning (Gilakjani, 2012). Considering the essential reasons for learning pronunciation, namely, perceived competence, as well as clarity and intelligibility aspects, it is a “must” skill for any English language learner. Correct pronunciation is a crucial part of communicative competence. Gilakjani (2012) added that pronunciation instruction assists the learners in acquiring a better understanding of native speakers; hence, this also helps enriching their capability to interact with ease and efficiently.

Many researchers have affirmed the significance of international intelligibility as a key component in communication and pronunciation experts have emphasised improved intelligibility as the most important goal of the classroom instruction in pronunciation (Rajadurai, 2007; Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2000). Although pronunciation is admittedly only one of several components contributing towards intelligible speech, intelligibility and “error gravity” studies attempting to isolate the role of particular linguistic features relative to others in the determination of intelligibility have consistently pointed to the importance of the pronunciation component. A study of interlanguage talk in a classroom of international students by Jenkins (1998) indicated that pronunciation is one single most problematic communication aspect. It is obvious that pronunciation is a salient component in effective communication and its significance has been verified by relevant parties that include not only researchers but also student respondents, teachers and even immigrants (Rajadurai, 2001; Derwing, 2003). The evidence points to poor level of pronunciation and with speakers with poor pronunciation will have communication problems

no matter how well they control other aspects like grammar and vocabulary (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996).

Despite much agreement on the significant value of pronunciation for effective communication, pronunciation instruction in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language has been neglected (Harmer, 2007). One probable explanation as to why pronunciation has long been neglected according to Darcy, Ewert and Lidster (2012) is simply that pronunciation is difficult to teach for several reasons. Teachers are often left without clear guidelines and we are confronted with contradictory purposes and practices for pronunciation instruction. This

indeed the case where there is no well-established systematic way of deciding what to teach, when and how to do it (Derwing & Foote, 2011). In fact, a common problem is in deciding whether to focus on segmentals and suprasegmentals, and to what extent for each component. A related challenge is how to address production and perception of English words. While there is evidence in the literature that both are necessary in a balanced approach to pronunciation development, the guidelines for teacher training and classroom materials are well-defined (Rajadurai, 2001; Derwing, 2003). Pronunciation teaching is often treated with least attention in the Malaysian ESL classes (Nair, Krishnasamy & De Mello, 2006; Pillai, 2017). One probably could be that teachers are faced with the tension that arises between whether to teach pronunciation towards preparing students to achieve international intelligibility in one's speeches, which is very subjective as to the meaning of intelligibility itself or to train students towards native-like pronunciation ability, which is a difficult goal to achieve and also it might mean losing one's local identity. Nonetheless, as English continues to be a global language, there needs to be specific efforts on the part English language teachers to teach pronunciation either explicitly or implicitly in view of such distinctive divergence in the phonology of Malaysian English due to contact with local languages and cultures that exert influence via mother tongue transfer, which definitely impedes intelligibility particularly in the global context.

OBJECTIVES

There are two main objectives of SIR:

1. To familiarize learners with the English phonetic system by introducing the 44 phonemes of the English language in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and
2. To create awareness about the importance of correct pronunciation of English words.

DESCRIPTIONS OF 'SAY IT RIGHT' (SIR)

SIR is a multimedia software which offers a new dimension to pronounce problematic English words correctly through its interactive approach. This innovative software is developed specifically for Malaysian learners of English as the target focus, particularly emphasizing phonetic sounds and symbols from the English phonemes (44 phonemes) to guide learners on the correct pronunciation of words. SIR functions as supplementary learning software that can benefit the target users in acquiring correct pronunciation of English words.

The following are several advantages of using SIR:

1. It promotes self-directed learning.
2. It provides immediate feedback to the learners.
3. It makes learning fun and interactive.
4. It enables learners to do their self-assessment.

SIR provides the learners with a learning menu, exercises and ways to pronounce the word correctly. All learning items are inclusive of 44 English phonemes. The learning menu comprises all the 26 letters in the English alphabet, which range from 'a' to 'z'. Learners interact with the learning process by clicking on the words to hear their correct pronunciation. A round of applause will be

immediately heard if the answer is correct, whereas a buzz will sound if the

answer is wrong. The selected words comprise problematic words, which are commonly mispronounced by Malaysian speakers, e.g. 'blood', 'debris', 'gesture', 'salmon', 'tuition', 'Wednesday', 'vegetable', etc. It is noted that the pronunciation is based on the standard British English.

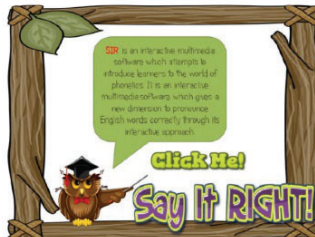


Fig. 1 The introduction page



Fig. 2 The menu page

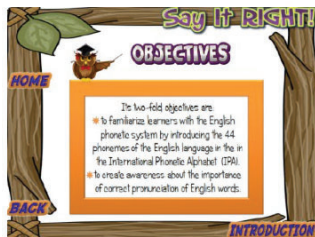


Fig. 3 The objective page - featuring its two main objectives.



Fig. 4 The learning page

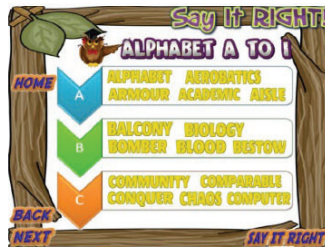


Fig. 5 The learning page

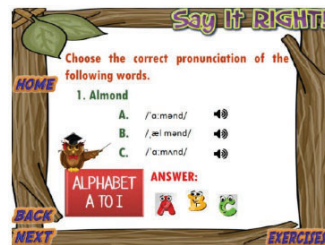


Fig. 6 The practice page

Unlike other interactive software available in the market, SIR's novelty lies in its specific focus on commonly mispronounced words in English and the phonological awareness the software introduces into the learner's cognition to facilitate comprehension and production. Phonological awareness which involves detecting, discriminating and manipulating the sound segment of spoken words while knowing that the smallest unit of sound can affect the meaning is an integral component of pronunciation learning. It also denotes awareness of sound patterns and the ability to isolate one sound from the other.

In terms of its usefulness, in the context of SIR interactive software, learners will be engaged in various linguistic operations that make use of information about the sound structure of the language, that is, all the phonemic aspects associated with the system of pronunciation of English. The ability to perceive, detect, isolate and manipulate the sound structure of the English language underlies the learning principles of SIR interactive software. This innovative software promotes self-directed learning, provides immediate feedback, makes learning fun and interactive, as well as enables learners to do self-assessment. Hence, learners will find it easy to relate to and engage with the activities and exercises provided.

Potential customers for SIR are the English language learners and teachers in schools and higher learning institutions. This software is highly recommended for every school or institution resource centre to provide a learning and teaching aid for a practical, fun and educational means of teaching and learning the English phonetics and phonemes. SIR is also attractive to any individuals who wish to enhance and master their English pronunciation.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The software was tested out with 45 Part 1 students of UiTM Sarawak, comprising Faculty of Chemical Engineering and Faculty of Electrical Engineering.

Instrumentation

For the purpose of this study, a set of questionnaires was used. The questionnaire was Usability Instrument. The instrument was selected because it has strong validity and reliability indices and has been used extensively in research. The estimated reliability at the overall level of Usability Instrument using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was .887. The Usability Instrument consists of three sections : (1) Profile of the Respondent, (2) Evaluation of multimedia elements and (3) User satisfaction. A five-point scale for rating was used and valued. The

level of satisfaction of each item is indicated by referring to the mean score of each item. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Mean scores

Level of Satisfaction	Mean
Low	1.00 to 2.39
Medium	2.40 to 3.79
High	3.80 to 5.00

Source: Landell, K. (1997)

Testing of Software

The software was tested out with 45 Part 1 students of UiTM Sarawak, comprising Faculty of Chemical Engineering and Faculty of Electrical Engineering. The time taken was approximately 1 hour. The class began with the students viewing the software. All the words (in alphabetical order) were selected. They viewed each word and listened to its correct pronunciation. The students were then asked to pronounce the given words and then do the various exercises that followed. After the demonstration of SIR software, the students were given a set of questionnaires and they were asked to rate each item that related to SIR.

Results and Findings

Table 2 shows the mean score and the standard deviation of all of the multimedia elements in SIR. The findings depicted that all of the multimedia elements in SIR had high mean scores ranging from 3.85 (SD=0.612) to 4.19 (SD=0.739). From the findings, it is revealed that the respondents were satisfied with the multimedia elements in SIR.

Table 2. The mean scores of the multimedia element in SIR

Multimedia Element	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Graphic	45	2.00	5.00	4.10	0.745
Sound	45	2.50	5.00	4.19	0.739
Interactivity	45	1.50	5.00	3.99	0.805
Interface	45	2.00	5.00	4.17	0.709
Text	45	1.40	5.00	3.85	0.612
Valid N (listwise)	45				

As depicted in Table 3, all the items of the user satisfaction elements in SIR had high mean scores ranging from 4.24 (SD=0.857) to 4.67 (SD=0.603). From the findings, it is revealed that the respondents were satisfied with the user satisfaction elements in SIR.

Table 3. The mean scores of the user satisfaction element in SIR

User Satisfaction	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
•The software application is easy to understand and use	45	2	5	4.27	0.889
•The ideas and concepts incorporated within the software application are clearly presented and easy to follow	45	2	5	4.29	0.727

User Satisfaction	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
☐ The content covered all essential information (both theory and practice)	45	1	5	4.24	0.857
☐ The software helps me learn pronunciation effectively	45	2	5	4.51	0.727
☐ The software creates awareness of the significance of phonetics and pronunciation to me	45	2	5	4.56	0.659
☐ The software helps me to understand my own pronunciation better	45	2	5	4.67	0.603
☐ The phonetic symbols in the (IPA) chart help me to understand English sounds better	45	2	5	4.53	0.694
Valid N (listwise)	45				

In relation to phonological awareness, the respondents were satisfied that SIR had helped them learn pronunciation effectively. The mean score was 4.51 (SD = 0.727). The respondents were also satisfied that SIR had made them aware the significance of phonetics and pronunciation. The mean score was 4.56 (SD=0.659). From the findings, it is also revealed that the respondents were satisfied that SIR had helped them to understand their own pronunciation better. The mean score was 4.67 (SD=0.603). Similarly, the respondents were satisfied that the phonetic symbols (IPA) in SIR had helped them to understand English sounds better. . The mean score was 4.53 (SD=0.694).

As it is evident from the findings, Say It Right (SIR) was used to good effect as a supplementary learning aid. The lecturer was able to attract the students' attention to the lesson and the students displayed a desire to know more about the learning software and also the anxiety to know what would happen next in the learning process. Since there was class involvement by the students, the lecturer was able to make the class lively. From the given exercises, the students did extremely well with the exercises. They managed to answer all the questions correctly even in the comparatively difficult exercises, such as identifying the correct pronunciation of the given words. SIR proved it could convey information instantly. The teacher did not need to explain in length to make the students understand each word and its correct pronunciation. It was because the pronunciation and the phonetic symbols each word were supplied in SIR.

Significance of Phonetics in Pronunciation Teaching

For a long time, teachers have been concerned with finding out the appropriate way of teaching the sounds of a foreign language without using the orthographic alphabet. Among the most useful suggestions offered is the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The IPA aims to provide visually distinctive symbols for all speech sounds which are phonologically distinct across the different languages.

In the same vein, phonetics has brought new insights into the teaching

and learning of pronunciation. Concerned with “the study of the physical properties of sounds and their place and manner of articulation in the vocal tract”, phonetics is a tool of paramount importance that is used in the systematic teaching of pronunciation. For instance, in any description of the English sound system, speech sounds are categorised into consonants and vowels. According to Roach (2010), awareness of this and how phonemes combine to produce individual words is useful as many errors made by students are largely due to slight differences in sound articulation and production.

The nature of phonetics can be explained in terms of what constitute the speech sounds produced in a particular language. In any language, we can identify a small number of regularly used sounds (vowels and consonants) that we call phonemes, for example, the vowels in the words ‘pin’ and ‘pen’ are different phonemes, and so are the consonants at the beginning of the words ‘pet’ and ‘bet’. Because of the notoriously confusing nature of English spelling, it is particularly important to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes rather than letters of the alphabet. One must be aware, for example, that the word ‘enough’ begins with same vowel phoneme as that at the beginning of ‘inept’ and ends with the same consonant as ‘stuff’. Hence, it is important for second/foreign language learners to understand the phoneme or single unit of sound produced in the target language and correspondingly how these sounds combine to form individual words (Roach, 2010). Say It Right (SIR), unlike any other computer-based interactive pronunciation teaching software, introduces learners to the world of phonetics by familiarising them with the 44 phonemes (consonants and vowels) in the English sound system. A gentle introduction to these 44 sounds found in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) will be taught through the Modelling-Production-Practice protocol.

CONCLUSION

Say It Right (SIR) has great potential for success in any pedagogical setting, from schools to universities as it combines strong general learning principles with a clear focus on practical phonetics taught in a fun and friendly atmosphere through its Modeling-Perception Approach. SIR's emphasis on self-paced learning and confidence building through guided awareness, mediated practice and production when learners are engaged in its activities suggests it is highly implementable in the teaching of English pronunciation. The overwhelmingly positive response of the student subjects in the pilot experiment adds credence to SIR's ability to create strong learner interest in practical phonetics in general and pronunciation learning in particular. Inclusive of 44 phonemic symbols which are arranged in a chart, they can be part of every student's learning resources. These phonemic symbols in SIR are simple and it has key words that show the sound of each symbol. These 44 phonemics symbols could be a very useful tool and resource especially in helping learners understand the importance of length and voicing. The phonetic symbols in SIR are a totally reliable guide in which each symbol represents one sound consistently. With the aid of the phonetic symbols, learners can become independent learners. Equipped with multimedia elements, SIR is able to arouse the learners' interest and stimulate their eagerness to experience learning English phonetics using the software. In fact, with phonetic symbols as the visual aid and guide, learners can use their eyes to help their ears. Thus, the more senses learners use, the better they will learn.

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