

METAPHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS INSTRUCTION: ACROLECTAL ENGLISH FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The study was aimed at implementing a metaphonological awareness instructional approach for pronunciation teaching and learning of suprasegmental features of English sounds namely, the schwa vowel and the catenation or linking features. The main focus of the study was to promote the use of acrolectal English in tertiary institutions in Malaysia so as to encourage students to gain native-like or near-native fluency particularly in terms of phonology. The study employed an ethnographic design, specifically using a qualitative case study method, which involves 5 participant undergraduates at a public university in Sarawak. The teacher-student scaffolding episodes were qualitatively evaluated in a context of teaching and learning of selected aspects of suprasegmental features of English sounds. The instruction was found to be positive in enhancing the students' metaphonological awareness of acrolectal English pronunciation.

Keywords: suprasegmental; acrolectal; schwa; catenation; pronunciation

1.0 INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In Malaysia, due to its long history of British colonisation, the British model of English seems to have become an acceptable standard particularly in the Malaysian school English language curriculum. Although many would agree that pronunciation is an aspect of language that is difficult to acquire, the reality is that generally in many English lessons in Malaysian schools, teaching pronunciation is granted the least attention (Nair, Krishnasamy and De Mello, 2006; Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011; Pillai, 2017). Pronunciation skill is undeniably a crucial issue in the practice of teaching English and it needs to be addressed possibly urgently especially in regards to the selection or creation/construction of effective methods, approaches or instructional models for teaching it. Studies have also indicated that poor pronunciation or heavily-accented English tends to be stigmatised at the workplace, and speakers often report being discriminated against and disadvantaged when it comes to employment or promotion (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003). One probable explanation as to why pronunciation has long been neglected is simply that teachers are often left without clear guidelines for pronunciation instruction. The overall aim of this research is to promote the use of acrolectal range of Malaysian English which is very close to the Received Pronunciation (RP) model (Baskaran, 2005; Gill, 2002 & Koo, 2009) to sophisticated learners. The choice of acrolectal English was found to be the preferred pedagogical model of university students in Malaysia (Gill, 2002).

2.0 LITERATURE STUDY

The premise of this research is based on the two opposing principles of learning pronunciation, that is, innocence versus sophistication (Strevens, 1974 in Dalton & Seidlhofer, 2004). These two principles are at opposing end of a scale with *innocence* at one end catering for young or less sophisticated learners doing such activities as imitation and mimicking of certain discrete sounds where as the *sophistication* at the other end deals with sophisticated older learners undergoing "...formal, specialised, intellectualised teaching methods; the more sophisticated the learner, the more sophisticated the instruction that can be used, and the higher the standard of achievement per hour of instruction he will typically reach." (Strevens, 1974, pp. 185-187 in Dalton & Seidlhofer, 2004). It means that the main focus for sophisticated learners will be more of sensitization of correct sounds than simply mere accurate production as expected of innocent learners. To be sensitized to the correct sounds is to be metaphorologically aware of the subtleties of suprasegmental features of English sounds.

The indigenisation of English in Malaysia has resulted in the emergence of Malaysian English (ME) and its sub-varieties which have been described in terms of an acrolect-mesolect-basilect cline (Baskaran, 1994; Gill, 2002). According to Gill (2002), "The ME acrolect may be prescribed pedagogical norm necessary for international communication. The mesolect is the variety used for intranational communication, between Malaysians of different ethnicity. The basilect, due to its extreme differences from the standard, is regarded as almost unintelligible outside of the speech communities in which it developed" (p.52). Baskaran (2005) sees the acrolect as a characteristic of standard Malaysian English used in formal contexts and as enjoying international intelligibility. Baskaran (2005) further describes the acrolect as 'official Malaysian English', the mesolect as the 'unofficial Malaysian English' used by the person-in-the street and the basilect as 'broken Malaysian English'.

The Education Ministry (2015) clearly prescribes that the British English should be followed as a pedagogic model in Malaysia (Pillai, 2017). This is clearly spelt out in the curriculum document as the following excerpts show:

"Teachers should use Standard British English as a reference and model for spelling, grammar and pronunciation." (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2015, p. 8)

While it is expected that it is not easy for learners to achieve British English/RP there might be an alternative for RP, that is a model closer to it or an approximation of the model to be near-native or native-like model. This pedagogical model is the one that Baskaran (2005), Gill (2002) and Koo (2009) describe as acrolect, an unmarked accent which is neither British nor American, neither Chinese nor Indian nor Malay, and yet the syntax, lexis, phonology and rhetoric are close to the standard norm RP.

2.1 Suprasegmental Features of English Sounds

According to Bloomberg (2015), producing or not producing neutral schwa vowel sounds affects the quality of one's pronunciation and how natural one sounds when speaking English. This differentiates between native and non-native speakers. Therefore, it is very important for ESL speakers who aspire to possess near-native accent to learn how to use the sound. Linking is also a common characteristic of native speaker's speeches as corroborated by Hieke's (in Reed & Levis, 2015) study whereby, it was found that in native speech, 80% of the potential link points turn into actualized links, while in non-native speech only 54% of the instances. Heike concluded that linking can be used as a parameter of fluency to differentiate NS from NNS speech. Hence, if ESL speakers were to approximate native accent to acquire a native-like enunciation, then linking feature is important for them to practise.

2.1.1 Schwa Vowel /ə/

The schwa is the most frequent vowel sound in English speech. It gives English a unique sound and rhythm, as well as being a major factor to an English accent when the native speakers speak. Any vowel letter can be pronounced as schwa and the pronunciation of a vowel letter can change depending on whether the syllable in which it occurs is stressed or not. The phonemic symbol for schwa is: /ə/. Schwa is also referred to as the ‘reduced vowel since so often alternates with various ‘full’ vowels” (Demirezen, 2010). There is a possibility of mispronunciation of the phoneme by ESL speakers due to a lack of knowledge of schwa vowel sound.

Table 1. Occurrence of positions of schwa in syllables

Syllable Position	Word	Phonemic Transcript	Likely Mispronunciation
Initial Syllable	agree	/ə'gri:/	/eə'gri:/
	ahead	/ə'hed/	/a'hed/
	ago	/ə'gəʊ/	/eə'goo/
	alarm	/ə'lɑ:m/	/a:'lɑ:m/
	align	/ə'lain/	/eə'lain/

2.1.2 Catenation/Linking

The term *catenation* or *linking* has been used in two different ways. It can refer to *connected speech phenomena* in general because they all link words forming units larger than the single word where word boundaries seem to disappear. The other definition, which will be adopted in this study, is more specific: *it is what happens to sounds at word boundaries in one thought group when two words are joined by connecting the last sound of one word to the first sound of the following word.*

Table 2. Some examples of linking

Type of Linking	Two words adjacent	Linking Transcript _ symbol for linking [.] marking syllable boundary
Two words adjacent to one another	Take it	/tei. k_it/
	Do it	/du:. w_it/
	Get it	/ge. t_it/
	Let it	/le. t_it/
	Let her	/le. t_ə/

2.2 Metaphonological Awareness Instruction

The term *metaphonological* is derived from the combination of metalinguistic awareness and phonological awareness. Metalinguistic awareness is simply the ability to think about language and talk about it. When a teacher asks his/her learners to discuss the use of some words or to explain the pertinence of an argument, s/he is promoting the development of metalinguistic awareness.

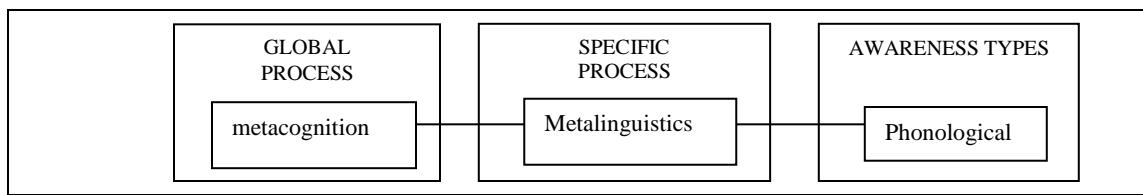


Figure 1. Metacognition and metalinguistic awareness (adapted from Tunmer, Pratt, & Herriman, 1984)

The pronunciation instructions to be given are aimed at developing metalinguistic awareness in learners. This is because in the context of this research, metalinguistic awareness enables the learner to understand how specific features of language are pronounced. Once the metalinguistic awareness is developed to a high level, it helps the learner use language with high confidence in a variety of contexts because s/he is in control (Euch & Huot, 2015). Hence, metaphonological awareness is at a level of metacognition which controls phonological awareness, only one specific type of awareness. In the Metaphonological Awareness Instruction, social interactions (teacher-student scaffolding episodes) between the teacher and students revolve broadly around several types of scaffolding as instructional tools. Hogan and Pressley (1997, p.17-29) identify five main types of macro-scaffolding which include *offering explanations, modelling desired behaviours, inviting students' participation, verifying and clarifying students' understandings, and inviting students to provide clues*. Since these interactive scaffolding involves dynamic interactions between the teacher and the student, the whole classroom process is best explored via a qualitative case study approach to generate detailed teacher-student scaffolding episodes.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research design of this research employed a **qualitative case study**. This is because the nature of the research which seeks to analyse how students improve and acquire accurate pronunciation of some aspects of suprasegmental features of English sounds, entails an in-depth and detailed description of the process as well as the cases (participants) involved within the process.

3.1 Research Participants

The participants in the research were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling. The participants were undergraduates from a public university in Sarawak. Since this paper is limited, only some analysis of scaffolding instruction episodes of ONE out of the five participants (the data is from a larger study) will be illustrated.

3.2 Research Instrument and Procedure

Qualitative observations were used and these observations are those in which the researcher takes field notes on the behaviour and activities of individuals at the research site. The teacher-student scaffolding episodes were observed and noted; relevant portions of the transcripts were interpreted and selected to be used in addressing the overall aim of the research.

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data were recorded from the teacher-student interaction episodes which were then transcribed for analysis. The analysis was done to identify the occurrences of micro-scaffolding carried out by the teacher and the students' emergent metaphonological awareness. The focus of this paper will be on the latter, that is, the emergent metaphonological awareness.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Participant A – Pronunciation of Schwa

In the Observation session, Participant A was exposed to instances of enunciation involving schwa. The teacher introduced a term (schwa) that was unfamiliar to him (Participant A) so much that this led to some sense of curiosity for him as he wanted to know more about it. This scaffold can be described as ***Raising the Student's Curiosity*** which involves making the student feeling curious about a topic and wanting to know more. The teacher provided positive feedback on Participant A's performance and not being judgmental of his ability. This scaffold can be described as ***Providing Positive Feedback without Evaluating Student's Thinking or Ability***. This is to ensure that students will not be discouraged despite their poor performance.

Table 2 Scaffolding Episode - Pronunciation of Schwa

Scaffolding Episode			Observation																								
Participant A: OK. Can I start now?			Participant A was ready for the challenge.																								
Teacher: Sure...			Teacher responded by saying yes and Participant A started pronouncing each word. Teacher listened attentively.																								
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>First Syllable</th> <th>Transcript</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Words</td> <td>Jack's</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Agree</td> <td>X /ea'gri:/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ahead</td> <td>✓ /ə'hed/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ago</td> <td>✓ /ə'gəʊ/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Alarm</td> <td>X /a.'la:m/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Align</td> <td>X /ə'lain/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Alike</td> <td>✓ /ə'lairk/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>About</td> <td>✓ /ə'baut/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Around</td> <td>✓ /ə'rəʊnd/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Attend</td> <td>✓ /ə'tend/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Accomplish</td> <td>✓ /ə'kʌmplɪʃ/</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>			First Syllable	Transcript	Words	Jack's	Agree	X /ea'gri:/	Ahead	✓ /ə'hed/	Ago	✓ /ə'gəʊ/	Alarm	X /a.'la:m/	Align	X /ə'lain/	Alike	✓ /ə'lairk/	About	✓ /ə'baut/	Around	✓ /ə'rəʊnd/	Attend	✓ /ə'tend/	Accomplish	✓ /ə'kʌmplɪʃ/	Teacher noted down Jack's enunciation of the words to determine the correct schwa sound.
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Agree	X /ea'gri:/																										
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Participant A: Oh, is it? (chuckled). I'm not good sir. My pronunciation is not good (chuckled).			Realizing that Participant A was surprised that he mispronounced certain words, the teacher offered to provide related information.																								

4.2 Participant A – Pronunciation of Catenation/Linking Features

In the Observation session, Participant A was exposed to instances of enunciation involving catenation/linking features.

Table 3 Scaffolding Episode - Pronunciation of Catenation/Linking

Scaffolding Episode			Observation																						
<p>Teacher: Next, we'll look at pronunciation involving link, linkages.</p> <p>Participant A: Ok. Now. (He proceeded to pronounce each phrase, from nos. 1 to 10).</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th colspan="3">Link Features</th> </tr> <tr> <th>Features</th> <th>Remark</th> <th>Jack's</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Take it</td> <td>✓</td> <td>/tei. k_it/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Do it</td> <td>✓</td> <td>/du:. w_it/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Get it</td> <td>✓</td> <td>/ge. t_it/</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Let her</td> <td>X</td> <td>/let hə/</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3">✓ - correct X – Incorrect [.] – syllable boundary _ – linking</td><td></td></tr> </tbody> </table>			Link Features			Features	Remark	Jack's	Take it	✓	/tei. k_it/	Do it	✓	/du:. w_it/	Get it	✓	/ge. t_it/	Let her	X	/let hə/	✓ - correct X – Incorrect [.] – syllable boundary _ – linking				Teacher listened attentively while noting down the ones correctly pronounced. Teacher provided Participant A with another challenge. He was then asked by the teacher to enunciate all the phrases again.
Link Features																									
Features	Remark	Jack's																							
Take it	✓	/tei. k_it/																							
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			<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Phrase</th> <th>Teacher's</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Let her</td> <td>/le. t_ə/</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Teacher provided some positive feedback on Participant A's enunciation but avoiding giving negative feedback that might discourage him.</p>	Phrase	Teacher's	Let her	/le. t_ə/																		
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Overall, Participant demonstrated confidence on his awareness of the occurrence of schwa in several positions and linking features in word combinations or phrases. Hence, this ensures possibly accurate enunciation of those features that approximate native-like enunciation.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

The outcome of the research indicates that the participants have gained metaphonological awareness as regards suprasegmental features such as the schwa and catenation. It also indicates that the acrolectal model can be an official Malaysian English as it is the preferred one by Malaysian students in tertiary institutions. Future research might use a quantitative approach a larger group but involving segmental aspects as well as other suprasegmental features such as intonation, rhythm and sentence stress patterns.

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