

English Pronunciation Activity through PRONOUNCE

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The purpose of this study is to provide some creative strategies in acquiring correct English language pronunciation. Firstly, this paper shares an understanding on crucial articulation of the English phoneme /r/ by second language learners (SLL) among undergraduates, as part of its exploration on the pronunciation of the English words. The focus is also on the SLL's realization of the phoneme – which they perceive to be correct – in initial, medial and final position. The qualitative approach is applied in the investigation, which looks into ways through which students acquire, among others include such variants of the /r/ phoneme in the course of their studies at the university. Data are collected by means of semi-structured questions distributed to forty first-year students pursuing undergraduate studies in a Malaysian university. The survey is conducted and responses analysed, using qualitative content analysis to identify major themes. The research finds that listening to dialogues in movies or listening to their favourite singers speaking, besides surfing websites, have an influence on the students' pronunciation. Better understanding of such influences would provide language teaching practitioners some guidance to facilitate learning outcomes more effectively. This study serves to further explore the assumption that SLL learning interference has been evolving, which includes the influence of technology in the students' daily process of learning. The study shows the importance of understanding such influences as a means to improve teaching and learning outcomes, in particular the strategy that is undertaken to improve pronunciation.

Keywords: pronunciation, influences, undergraduates, teaching, learning

INTRODUCTION

Learning English has begun in Malaysian schools and universities since five decades ago. This historical significance of language usage using English has also undergone waves of change due to political and social pressures that sometimes surpass the nation's education system. Hence, English being the international language as well as the second language in Malaysia, has been the embattled and embittered medium of diverging varieties among its users. Particularly so is its use in terms of the spoken component (Siti Akmar et al., 2009).

Goodwin (2001) also stresses that second language proficiency is most likely to be judged through the speaker's pronunciation. The concern of this paper is in congruence to Goodwin's (2001) contention. However, the focus is on Malaysian learners of English, that is, students whose accents are salient on second language speech production. It has been agreed that intelligible pronunciation plays an important role which supports effective oral communication for SLL. On the other hand, unintelligible pronunciation by SLL prevents effective and successful communication with first and second language language speakers.

This investigation looks into the commonly mispronounced /r/ phoneme in initial, medial, and final position in spoken English (Rubrecht, 2004). The lack of a comprehensive remediation strategy is rooted in a general misunderstanding of the /r/ phoneme, deficiencies in university education instruction, deficient remediation materials and most notably, the absence of a generally accepted *effective* method for tackling the inarticulate realization of the core /r/ phoneme in English pronunciation. The purpose of this paper is to provide an understanding on the ways in which SLL undergraduates use the sounds which they perceive as correct in their communication using English as a second language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Correct pronunciation of words in the English language has been the challenge of SLL. It does not only involve individual phonemic sounds, but also word stress, sentence stress, and intonation. There are also influences of the sound derived from technology-initiated communications via music, movies and manner. The study looks into these influences on English pronunciation involving the phoneme /r/ as it appears in English words. Hence, it is common to hear variations of the /r/ phoneme realized by learners, which makes it difficult for them to identify the acceptable or standard pronunciation of /r/ in the English language. It has to be noted however, that an acceptable realization of English phonemes can boost self-esteem, facilitate communication, and possibly lead to a better job, or earn learners more respect at the workplace. Effective communication is of great importance; hence, teachers of ESL have to work on pronunciation difficulties that significantly hinder communication (Gilbert, 2007).

Nunan (1993) explains that some of the difficulties that occur in teaching pronunciation under EFL involve two settings, namely, the teacher and the classroom. The teachers are usually non-native speakers; hence, they are not confident or may not be competent enough to provide the necessary feedback which is useful in teaching pronunciation successfully. Next, the real

classroom situation does not always include native speakers; therefore, there would be no available role model for learners to hear the correct pronunciation of English. These are some of the challenges faced by local undergraduates with regards to learning English pronunciation.

As in Malaysia, learning English in other countries has also been under the scrutiny of many researchers. Silveira (2002), for example, has conducted a study with beginners of English in Brazil. These learners were made aware of the erroneous pronunciation of consonants in final position in the English language. The results of the study indicate that teaching pronunciation is an effective means of helping learners overcome problems in using spoken English and in the effective teaching and learning of English in general. Therefore, the paper will scrutinize issues related to learning of the language in order to identify the way in which undergraduates pick up the pronunciation or mispronunciation of English words. Subsequently, it will assist language instructors to remedy cases of mispronunciation with regards to the teaching and learning of English.

In a study conducted on Japanese students who are learners of English, Bradlow et al., (1997) show that these learners require effective means of resolving pronunciation problems through correct teaching. The study further proves that Japanese learners of English have improved greatly in the production of the sounds /l/ and /r/. These sounds have been taught explicitly and thus, students' pronunciation has improved greatly. This study has proven (Bradlow et al., 1997) that the teaching of pronunciation is an effective way to help Japanese learners pronounce English words correctly. The findings also indicate that one explicit method of effective teaching is to expose them clearly to phonemic differences.

In addition, in a groundbreaking study, Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998) have found that clear and definite instruction is given only to the experimental group. In this study, both the experimental and control groups are evaluated by both trained and untrained listeners, before and after the experiment. The results show that explicit phonetic instruction enhances learners' pronunciation. Nonetheless, a student's first language often interferes with English pronunciation. Derwing et al., (1998) have used the example of Spanish students learning English. Although there is aspiration when the bi-labial voiceless plosive /p/ is realised in English, the phoneme is not aspirated when realised in Spanish. Therefore when a native speaker of Spanish articulates the word 'pig' without aspiration on the phoneme /p/, an American may hear the word 'big' being said instead. This situation may confuse learners as they may not be able to identify specific problems in the sound. Observations and suggestions can be made to help learners overcome such mispronunciation.

In the current investigation, the researchers attempt to observe and understand the various pronunciations in the English sound system, in particular variations of the /r/ as produced by Malaysian students learning English. This is yet another challenge resulting from differences in the sound system between English and the SLL's first language. Such differences in sound are mostly found in the realization of vowels. The long and short vowel sounds in the English language are non-existent in some of the SLL's first language. For instance, the short [ɪ] in the word 'ship', in contrast to the long [i:] in the word 'sheep', which some SLL may find difficult to

distinguish. In a related research, Ristuccia (2007) reiterate that the Japanese are known to have difficulty differentiating between the flap /r/ and the lateral /l/, as their language contains neither of these phonemes, but a sound somewhere in between, close to a trill /r/. To overcome difficulties such as this, it is crucial that students are made to engage in active listening, because they are unlikely able to produce sounds they cannot hear. Descriptions of the sound and mouth position can help students increase their awareness of subtle sound differences, such as the following:

- /r/ is a glide because of its extreme flexibility in assuming the role of either a consonant or a vowel
- /l/ has vowel-like characteristics especially if the preceding sound is a vowel
- /r/ controlled vowels (e.g. /or/, /ar/) comprised two sounds (the vowel + the /r/).

The second set of phonemic sounds is further illustrated in Ristuccia (2007). It comprises eight distinct vocalic variations of the phoneme /r/:

<i>ar</i>	<i>air</i>	<i>ear</i>	<i>ire</i>	<i>or</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>rl</i>	<i>Prevocalic r</i>
car	software	beer	tyre	sea- shore	butter	girl	rain

In addition, Ristuccia (2007) provides different sets of words in relation to the different distinct vocalic variations of the phoneme /r/. The following table displays examples of words which have been separated further by initial, medial and final word positions:

/ar/

army	Artist	arm	art
park	Barn	heart	carpet

/air/

airmail	Airplane	air condition	airport
dairy	Stairs	barefoot	canary
share	Square	bear	pair

/ear/

irritated	Ears	irrigation	earache
cereal	Hero	period	zero
pier	Year	hear	deer

/ire/

iron	Ireland	ironed	ironing
tired	Fireplace	hired	fireman
bonfire	Tire	wire	campfire

/or/

orbit	Orchid	organic	organ
corn	Horn	sports	horse
four	Bookstore	door	sore

/er/

earth	Herbs	early	earthquake
factory	Battery	finger nail	flowerpot
finger	Anchor	dollar	letter

/rI/

girl	Squirrel	curl	pearl
world	Swirl	admiral	barrel

Prevocalic /r/

red	Rabbit	read	rent
race	Rake	row	rack
rain	Ride	rob	rig

METHOD

Data are collected by means of semi-structured questioning protocol in an informal meeting involving forty students enrolled in a first-year programme at a Malaysian university. The approach is an exploratory qualitative study into the ways in which students acquire such pronunciation of the plosives while studying at the university (Gao & Zhang, 2010). The respondents are given a set of questions each and they are requested to answer the semi-structured protocol in a hall where all of them convene. The responses of the questions are then analysed, using qualitative content analysis to identify major themes.

DISCUSSION

A total of 35 questionnaires were returned out of the 40 distributed. When asked how they have acquired the pronunciation of words in the English language, the following indicate the common trends, which are, through dictionary, speaking to teachers and others who are conversant, through the internet, watching movies, listening to songs and music, having tuition; a minimal number of respondents made use of the language learning package Linguaphone.

From the survey, it has been found that technology plays an important role in assisting students to learn pronunciation. To 57 per cent of the respondents, movies are their medium of learning, while 46 per cent learn pronunciation through music, namely by listening to English songs. Another 17 per cent attributed their learning of English pronunciation to the Internet. The survey also indicates that only 19 per cent of the respondents learn pronunciation through their

teachers. The outcome of the survey would suggest therefore that English language instructors at the university provide more effort and be provided with more time to teach pronunciation. For teachers of English in generally, there must be specific training in the English sound system involving trainers with wide experience and knowledge in spoken English as used by native speakers.

Since there are specific pronunciation features to be addressed in the teaching and learning of the English sound system, there are experts who suggest that English teachers who are non-native speakers are specially trained in the language. The experts have identified the strategies described below to facilitate the promotion of English among SLL. From the survey conducted, it has been found that Malaysian students learning English have acquired the pronunciation knowledge of related sounds through the influence of media, namely, by listening to dialogues in English movies, by listening to their singing idols speaking, as well as through websites and online broadcast. Hence, in order to help learners acquire better English pronunciation, teachers have to incorporate online facilities as part of their teaching strategy. Some websites such as *The Sounds of English*, *American Accent Training* and *EnglishClub.com* may offer guidelines to help learners pronounce various English sounds, and these websites can also be adapted or adopted by teachers to add value to the teaching of the English sound system.

Teaching Suggestions

Students learn from their teachers, and to assist teachers of English promote the teaching of correct pronunciation to students, the following are suggestions on activities that encompass the development process of English word pronunciation. Based on literature (Derwing et al., 1998; Bradlow et al., 1997), the acronym, PRONOUNCE, displays the teaching instruction techniques, as follows:

P – Picture: By drawing simple diagrams showing the different positions of the tongue and the lips in the realization of English words, SLL can clearly see the changes in the shape of the mouth while the teacher models the sounds. Besides, SLL can also use a mirror to observe the different movements themselves, involving the mouth, lips, and tongue, while imitating the teacher.

R – Repetition: These are commonly known as *tongue twisters* which are helpful for learners to practise specific target sounds, besides being entertaining to learners. The teacher, however, has to make sure that the selection of vocabulary is not too difficult for the learners.

- To find a starting point for treatment (some students can say more than you think they can).
- To find out where you will begin your treatment (e.g. visual vowels or using a successful point of production).
- To properly diagnose the problem (i.e. are they just distorting the vowels or can they say some word positions, but not others?).

O – Oral: Word or sentence intonation can be mimicked with a kazoo, or alternatively by humming. This will take the students' attention off the meaning of a word or sentence, and help them focus on the intonation (O'Brien, 2004).

N – Nuance: Minimal pairs, or words such as 'bit/bat' that differ by only one sound, are useful in helping students distinguish similar sounds. They can be used to illustrate voicing ('curl/girl') or commonly confused sounds ('play/pray'). Remember that it is the sound and not the spelling that needs to be focussed on.

O – Oozing Air: Aspiration refers to a puff of air when a sound is produced. Many languages have far fewer aspirated sounds than English, and students may have trouble hearing the aspiration. The English /p/, /t/, /k/, and /ch/ are some of the more commonly aspirated sounds. Although these are not always aspirated, they usually are when they are prevocalic or appear at initial position. To illustrate aspiration, have your students hold up a piece of facial tissue a few inches away from their mouths and push it with a puff of air while pronouncing a word containing the target sound.

U – Uniformity: The practice on syllables allows SLL to count syllables in a word and hold up the correct number of fingers, or place objects on the table to represent each syllable. It can be illustrated through syllable stress by clapping softly or loudly, corresponding to the syllables of a word. For example, the word 'beautiful' would be loud-soft-soft. It is necessary to practise with short lists of words with the same syllabic stress pattern, and then see if learners can list other words that have similar syllable patterns.

N – Nasal: The vowel sounds, as they are realised through the nasal tract, can be demonstrated using the rubber band technique. The teacher shows stretching of the rubber band when pronouncing words with long vowel; and she is to contract the rubber band when saying words with short vowel sounds. The practice can be repeated by introducing other pairs of words which have their short and long vowel sounds.

C – Convergence: When phrases and sentences are articulated, students must be aware that one smooth sound is produced instead of a series of separate words. For example, "I am a second language learner" is expressed as /ai-yæm-ə-sekənd-læŋɡwɪdz-lə:nə/. This continuation of the sound from one word to another has to be repeated as the student goes along mastering the pronunciation.

E – Energising: There are voiced and voiceless consonants in the English sound system. The realization of voiced consonants will lead to the vibration of the vocal cord. For example, /g/ is a voiced phoneme, while /k/ is its voiceless counterpart, and the articulation of both sounds involves movements in the same parts of the mouth. The learners can be instructed to touch their throat while articulating voiced and voiceless sounds to feel the difference. They should feel vibration only when articulating the voiced consonants.

CONCLUSION

Through understanding of the non-didactic influences in students' acquisition of the English word sounds, language teaching practitioners will be better informed of measures and approaches to facilitate learning outcomes more effectively. This paper serves to promote further the assumption that SL learning interference has been evolving with regards to the teaching and learning of English pronunciation. This scenario has included the influence of technology as the prime environmental factor in the students' daily process of learning. The study shows the importance of understanding such influences as a means of improving learning outcomes.

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Online Support

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- <http://www.cheltenham.org/webpages/jpasternack/r.cfm>
- <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/esl/pronunciation.cfm>
- www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta_April_07_bgr.php

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