

A STUDY OF PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS AMONG TAMIL SPEAKING ENGLISH LEARNERS IN SRILANKA

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes some frequently occurring problems concerning pronunciation of Tamil speaking English Learners in Sri Lanka. Accordingly factors leading to these difficulties such as: interference of Tamil learner's age, psychological factors, insufficient knowledge in phonetics and phonology of English language and bad prior pronunciation instruction in the beginning etc. The objective of this research is to analyze these difficulties in a linguistic perspective and recommend practical suggestions to overcome these barriers. In this regard, Tamil speaking under graduates of Southeastern University of Sri Lanka has been taken as the sample. Observation being the main source of data collection along with discussions and interviews were scrutinized for the study.

Key words: Pronunciation, English Learner, sounds, problem

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a mode of communication. Similar to grammar and vocabulary pronunciation to o has a significant role in learning a language. As English is an international language and trade language people all around the world give more priority in learning to speak in English with correct pronunciation. Amongst Srilankans English is considered as the language of prestige and intellect. Tamil speaking Sri Lankans give more priority to learn and speak English among them are the students of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. However there are many challenges and barriers that hinder them to speak English with good pronunciation. Because so many English learners prefer learning without paying much attention to pronunciation, this leaves the learners in confusion whenever they meet difficulties in oral communication. The most significant factor being the knowledge on phonetics creates confidence in speaking. During the research a reasonable accuracy in the pronunciation have been achieved from certain students. This is due to factors like; prior pronunciation instruction, English exposure and knowledge on phonology and phonetics etc. However many students fail to attain perfection. They feel uncomfortable in their first attempt at speech in English and they're afraid of failure, ridicule and laughter. "Observations that limited pronunciation skills can undermine learner's self-confidence come on restrict social interaction and negatively influence estimations of a speaker's credibility and abilities are not new." (Morley, 1998).

Proper pronunciation, stress and intonation directly affects the appropriate communication in conversation. This paper explores some factors influencing English compensation from the objective factors and analyzing to sound system by comparing English and Tamil pronunciations, and then provides some practical suggestions for teaching and learning it effectively. As a second language learner to speak with native like pronunciation is a difficult task. Hence this research attempts to identify the problematic areas of English pronunciation and to identify the exact factors behind them and try to find appropriate and easy techniques that help the learners to speak English with correct pronunciation.

1.1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sri Lanka which is a multi-national country is the home for people who converse in many languages. Sinhala and Tamil being the native languages, English is taught and learnt as second language. In Sri Lanka, even though English is considered as a second language, it is an essential skill when it comes to the employment. Tamil speaking English learners in Sri Lanka struggle with improper pronunciation to meet the competency of English Language.

Many linguistics and researchers concluded that the English pronunciation problems among speakers of other languages are the same but it's according to each language background. According to former presidential adviser Sunimal Fernando "children from Tamil speaking homes are taught English in the way that dead languages like Pali, Sanskrit, Latin and Greek are taught to students, only to read and write and never to speak" He further points out "as an issue for failing to pronounce English accurately. Furthermore the failure of perfect English pronunciation is mainly due to due linguistic factors(O'Connor,2003).

The errors made by the speakers of other languages, who speak English, are something systematic rather than random. Tamil speaking English learners mispronounce English due to the effect of their mother tongue as they substitute English with their mother tongue. For example the phonemes /p/ and /b/ are same. Also there is a conflict between L1 and L2 as noted by Moosa, 1972. Tamil learners of English form habits of their mother tongue (Tamil), so they strongly build the phonological features of Tamil, this makes them encounter many difficulties in distinguishing sound system between L1 and L2. In Tamil, each letter represent only one sound. So it's easy to read any word from written text also there is no sound which is not pronounced (silent) as it happens a lot in English. When there is a difference in the sound system of L1 and L2 showed that errors are expected to be committed.(Nunan,2001). Another important problem Tamil speaking learners face in particular, is that English vowel sound has more than just one pronunciation. So this causes many difficulties to the learner and lead them to a miss pronunciation.(Cruttenden ,1994). languages cannot be taught ,they can only be learnt(Williams 2013). Thus learners should nourish their language by reading and listening to move English articles.

"The primary purpose of language is communication. Grammar is important but there is a big picture. Language is no longer seen as being learnt through mechanical exercise , it's developed through learners interacting and engaging.(William,2013), Therefore it's in the hands of the learners to polish their pronunciation overcoming the hinders.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research is presented with qualitative approach. As modes of obtaining data for the study analysis questionnaires containing open ended questions were provided among 150 SEUSL undergraduate students who were involved in the sampling population. Further informal participatory interviews were conducted among the instructors of English language and among peers including pronunciation tests being conducted. Random sampling was adopted for this purpose. Through this method of qualitative approach we could collect genuine information in accordance with the true perception and plight of the learners.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

3.1. Factors influencing pronunciation

There are several factors influencing the pronunciation of the second language learners. Through this particular study we could find out some of the major influencing factors namely influence of the native language, learner's age, Linguistic variations, attitude and psychological factors, motivation and concern for good pronunciation, classroom atmosphere and amount and type of prior instruction.

3.1.1. Interference of Tamil to English

Through our observations in our study it has been found that the learner's L1 (Tamil) influences the pronunciation of the target language (English) and is a remarkable factor in accounting for foreign accents. Accordingly English and Tamil differ on numerous phonological and phonetic features. When pronouncing English words speakers of Tamil encounter many challenges stemming from differences in sound inventory and distribution of sounds among the categories of phonemes and allophones ultimately leading to errors in aspiration, tone, and intonation in L2.

Tamil learners of English have difficulties with English sounds as they are deeply influenced by similar sounds in their L1. However they are very different from one another.

When a certain sound in L1 does not exist in L2 it poses difficulty for the learner to pronounce. Consequently they go for the nearest equivalents to substitute it with a similar sound in L1.

A typical example will be the substitute of /v/ for /w/. The labio-dental phoneme replaces the bilabial phoneme.

- *wet - vet*
- *while - vile*

Similarly the use of /f/ and /s/ instead of /j/

- */plejə/ as /plefə/ (pleasure as pleasher)*
- */vɪjən/ as /vɪfən/ (vision as vishion)*

As Tamil has fewer vowel sounds compared to English, this challenge is on its peak in case with vowel sounds. In this regard, neither the similar sound for monophthongs /æ/ and /ə/ nor diphthongs except /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ are present in Tamil.

- *Mad-made*
- *Bat - bet*

Thus in addition to a difference in pronunciation, it causes a change in the meaning too.

Another notorious challenge encountered by the Tamil speakers is the usage of consonant cluster. Consonant clusters are very rare in Tamil and can never be word-initial. As a result certain words in L2 are hard to pronounce or sometimes mispronounced.

- Three as *thiree*
- Clinic as *cilinic*
- Criminal as *ciriminal*

Further certain words in L2 having /s/ as the initial sound followed by another consonant sprung as another challenge in the English pronunciation. Subsequently they pronounce /s/ as /ʃs/

- /**sku:l**/ as /**ʃsku:l**/ (school as ischool)
- /**speʃəl**/ as /**ʃspeʃəl**/ (special as ispecial)

In addition the sound /z/ as in lizard doesn't exist in Tamil written language. Tamil has many dialects around the country. People who live in Northern districts of Srilanka pose a dialect which is nearer to written Tamil language. In this regard most from the Northern have complexities in pronouncing /z/ sound. They replace /z/ with /s/ For example:

- prize as *prise*
- zebra as *seebra*

Some speakers confuse the sound in **she** and **see**

In Tamil there is no separate letter for /b/. [b] is used as a allophone of /p/. In the word /*pɑ:mbʊ*/ same letter is used for both /p/ and /b/. Similarly [k], [g] , [h] are allophones of /k/. This too influences their L2 pronunciation.

Moreover complexities in English spelling give a distinct sound depending on the position or combination of letter. For example:

- DEMON: **dee-mon** as **dey-mon**
- WEDNESDAY: **wenz-day** as **wed-nes-day**
- TOMB: **toom** as **taw-mb**

At some instances an equivalent sound exist in L1 yet the place of articulation and manner of articulation of that particular sound in two languages are different. For example /r/ is an approximant in English and used as a silent sound in at certain places. But in Tamil it is a trill. As for that Tamils commonly use / r / in L2 as a trill.

- **ka:as ka:r** (car)

3.1.2. Learner's age

Children tend to pick up accents very quickly and the ability to do so seems to diminish with age. And the knowledge of their native language acts as an annoying interference to a large extent. During our study we identified that the most challenging part of the second language acquisition to be the 'pronunciation' among the SEUSL undergraduates who were involved in the research sampling. The younger the learners the easier they are able to learn the sound system more effectively, while the learning process of the adults may be more like to be hindered because of their age. For the younger students it is easier for them to acquire an accurate pronunciation and it becomes increasingly difficult as they age, as the brain's original plasticity diminishes and it becomes more rigid.

3.1.3. Learner's attitude and psychological factors

Research and studies consistently show that second language learners with positive attitude towards learning English learn faster, by the same spoken students who are genuinely open minded and interested in improving their pronunciation often do improve it. It is truly amazing what the right attitude can do. On the other hand students who have prejudices or natural dislike for English will be less successful than with those with a positive attitude. The lecturers must help the students overcome their barriers.

Out of all these factors student motivation is a significant one. According to our study we found that it really made a difference in the learning process of SEUSL students. Students simply want to fit in to the language, they do not want to get discriminated just because they have a poor and funny accent. Adult learners really need to speak clearly and effectively for their professional business communication purposes. Therefore the instructors can assist those who are lacking in motivation.

3.1.4. Loud reading.

Loud reading is the great way to practice pronunciation because this is an opportunity for them to get their mispronunciation corrected.

3.1.5. Native language interference.

Every language affects English learners differently. English is a language which deals much with stress and intonation which decides the rhythm and tone of the language. In fact most errors are fixed by practicing more. The classic example is Germans pronouncing "w" as "v". French people not pronouncing the letter "H" is another well-known mother tongue influence. These mispronunciations occur because our native language has distinct sounds and pronunciations. When trying to cope with the softer sounds that English can have , it can be difficult. This is also a reason why some people struggle with correctly pronouncing different vowel sounds. We cannot do away with mother tongue influence completely. For us Srilankans, Standard SriLankan accent is available. Therefore this accent for Srilankans help us reduce the mother tongue influence so much in the target language.

3.2. A contrastive analysis on the phonological system of Tamil and English languages.

The distinctions between the target language and the learner's native language can greatly influence the second language acquisition. Therefore it becomes necessary to give the knowledge on the differences between the two languages during the learning process which would freely allow them for a conscious comparison of the two languages.

The vast difference in phonology between English and Tamil languages gives rise to difficulties in pronunciation of words for Tamil speaking students. The phonological system of Tamil language alphabet consists of 247 letters. It can be divided into 12 vowel sounds, 18 consonant sounds, 216 vowel consonant sounds and a special letter. The vowel consonant sounds also have long and short sounds. Tamil is characterized by retroflex consonants, like any other Dravidian languages. It also uses a liquid 'l'. Both languages fall under the intonation language category, English tend to use more variety in their intonation patterns than speakers of Tamil language. Intonation is important and plays a part in establishing

rapport, expressing empathy as well as achieving success in communication. The speech which lacks stress and monotonousness may ultimately bring about an effect of boredom in speech. Therefore for the learners to overcome these difficulties in intonation, intonation activities should be practiced. Falling intonation plays an important function in English and is used to indicate finality. For speakers of Tamil language it is common to use level intonation pattern at the end of statements instead of a distinct fall. This feature may interfere with smooth turn taking. The listener may think that there is more to come.

The stress factor too plays a dominant role in deciding the tone as well as the targeted content in the target language. It is helpful to listen to native speakers of English in order to find out where the stress occurs in certain words. Also a dictionary should indicate which syllable is stressed.

In English sound variation for different words is affected by varying of the vowels and consonants. Tamil language has the presence of one letter giving many sounds, for which English alphabet provides with separate letters for different sounds. The complicated spelling pattern of English language is also a noted barrier in letting the learners struggle in picking up the correct pronunciation. For example the words like IRON, DEBRIS, GENRE, MONK, EPITOME, TOMB, DENGUE, CHASSIS, PRONUNCIATION, PIZZA etc, are noted in our observation tests as some of the troublesome words to be pronounced among the students. Another problematic feature in English language is that one vowel letter producing many sounds. For example in the words like 'but' and 'put', 'book' and 'fool' and so on. In SriLankan speaking Tamil they also use many English words such loan words are not spoken concerning the phonological rules, thus when they speak those loan words in English language too, learners tend to pronounce in the wrong pronunciation. Example: - BICYCLE, COFFEE, CAR, OFFICE, OVER TAKE and so on.

Each of these languages have peculiar phonemes. Many English phonemes have equivalent s in Tamil, but some English phonemes do not have Tamil counterparts. For example there is no Tamil counterpart for some English vowels. In addition to it the place of articulation and the manner of articulation functions are different in both languages. Also in English language there is aspirated and non-aspirated sounds while it is lacking in Tamil language. Tamil language does not differentiate voiced and unvoiced plosives, Instead plosives are articulated with voice depending on their position in a word in accordance with the rules of Tamil phonology. Another distinctive feature is the presence of rhotic, while no vowels appear between plosives and between a plosive and rhotic. Also the position of phonemes and the way of combining them are not the same within the two languages. MacLeish (www.melta.org.my/ET/1992/main 6.html) said: "Consonant clusters present high frequency problems to any speaker who is learning English as a foreign language. This is so because clusters are often combinations of problem sounds, while in Tamil only restricted consonant clusters are available. (For example there are no word initial clusters, neither aspirated nor voice stops. Thus it becomes evident from the above article that the various distinctions available in both languages results in the mispronunciation of the phonological sounds in the target language

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

The study was initiated by the observation of some Tamil speaking undergraduates in SEU SL, from different regions of Sri Lanka who mispronounce some English sounds. Example: /z/ , /j/ and /r/ etc.

Some Scholars argued such problems may not sometimes lead to a misunderstanding if the listener knows the context. yet most of the researchers consider this as serious for learners who want to speak correct pronunciation and someone whose career in the future is related to the field of English language.

It was noticed many factors influence learning pronunciation of L2. Among them knowledge on phonetics and phonology being the most prominent reason takes much attention in this research. It was noticed problem with pronunciation of vowel sounds: monophthongs and diphthongs in English is a major challenge. Tamil has comparatively fewer vowel sounds. Stress and intonation differences between L1 and L2 influences to a higher degree. These mispronunciations ultimately lead to change in meaning and the listener to misinterpretation.

Based on the results of this study it can be concluded that the mispronunciation of the speakers of Tamil are due to Learners age, attitude, motivation, psychological factors, wrong prior instruction, insufficient knowledge on phonetics and absence of English exposure etc.

Recommendations

According to the results of this study we can recommend the following:

For teachers:

- Proper pronunciation instructions of English language should be given at the early age. Each child should be given individual attention.
- Like Grammar and vocabulary pronunciation too needs to be taught in class.
- Teachers providing phonetic knowledge on L2 to the students will help them to compare it with their own when learning pronunciation.

For learners:

- Putting aside the fear of failure and ridicule and develop self-confidence.
- Practice, practice, practice. Practicing, collecting and developing the pronunciation error. For this listener should listen to English sounds regularly with the help of technological aids.
- Loud reading and practicing tongue twisters on a regular basis would bring Improvement
- Get oneself into an English exposure by making friends with English speakers.

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