A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON ADDRESSING MISPRONUNCIATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Mispronunciation is a common problem among second language learners due to both suprasegmental and segmental features. Besides mother tongue interferences, mispronunciation of words is influenced by other factors, as disclosed in this study. Therefore, this paper explores college students' mispronunciation and seeks ways to address this problem in the shortest time possible. Two English medium magazine articles were used as a platform to accommodate this study. Thirty words from the articles were identified to assess the students' pronunciation. All these words were read by the students in context, not in isolation. The respondents for this study consist of six college students who are currently pursuing their diplomas at a private university. This study employed a one-group pre-test - post-test design and semi-structured interview. Two different treatments, pronunciation drills and tongue twisters, were used to address the problem. The analysis of the data revealed that the suprasegmental features were more dominant than segmental features in their mispronunciation, and the short treatments had helped in correcting the students' mispronunciation effectively. The interview also confirms the effectiveness of these treatments in helping students improve their pronunciation.

Keywords: mispronunciation, suprasegmental, segmental, tongue twister, pronunciation drills

1. Introduction

Having difficulty speaking and pronouncing words properly is a common problem for many English language students. Good pronunciation skills are a key element to every ESL student's ability to communicate in English (Stead, 2010). Thus, good pronunciation skills and communication ability are closely connected. Pronunciation is an integral part of communication, as implied by Hinofotis and Baily (1980:124-5), "*up to a certain*

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proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation", not vocabulary or grammar. As such, it is acceptable to claim that good communication involves proper pronunciation. Proper pronunciation simply means reproducing the sound of the word through speech in such a way that any fluent speaker of the language would easily know and understand the message. In other words, the correct sounds uttered by the speaker can be understood by others. If the speaker is great at grammar and knows many different words, good pronunciation will help others hear and understand him or her even more clearly.

Senel (2006: 111), in his study, said that "*one of the general objectives in the foreign language teaching, maybe the most important one, is to teach the learners to speak the target language accurately and intelligibly since to learn a language also means to produce the sounds, utterances, and the words properly and correctly*". However, the view that EFL/ESL learners must be taught to speak the target language accurately and with a native-like accent does not hold much water anymore. The recent growth in the use of English as an International Language has gradually changed learner's pronunciation needs and goals. According to Binghadeer, 2008; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996 Nagamine, 2002, as cited in Nagamine, 2011, the pedagogical attention in current pedagogy of English pronunciation is geared towards suprasegmental features rather than native-like accuracy.

However, the fact is, pronunciation is not an easy skill to master, especially for L2 speakers of the English Language; Fraser (2000) observes that many learners of English as a second language have "*major difficulties*" with English pronunciation even after years of learning the language. In line with Fraser's (2000) statement above, some of my foundation students do have difficulties with English pronunciation, although they have been learning the language for more than ten years. Therefore, it would be interesting and meaningful to identify, analyse and seek solutions to their mispronunciations. As Ashby (2002) commented, "*a modern language teacher is expected to have sufficient knowledge of articulatory phonetics, a well-trained ear, and skills to analyze as well as remedy learner's articulatory errors*."

Besides that, native-like accuracy and intelligibility are also vital where pronunciation is concerned. Nagamine (2011) suggests that "*ESL/EFL teacher-educators may consider both native-like accuracy and mutual intelligibility or overall comprehensibility as a major goal when teaching English pronunciation to student-teachers*." The phrase native-like in this context refers to pronunciation, which is very close to L1 speakers' pronunciation. Therefore, this study is carried out to identify common pronunciation errors made by eight TESL foundation student-teachers and to find simple ways to overcome their mispronunciation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Mispronunciation

Mispronunciation is defined by the <u>Oxford English Dictionary</u> as "*incorrect or inaccurate pronunciation*". Mispronunciation is part of the puzzle of learning a second language. There are many reasons for this situation. According to Nordquist (2019),

mispronunciation is the act or habit of pronouncing a word in a way that is regarded as nonstandard, unconventional, or faulty. Words and names are sometimes deliberately mispronounced for comic or malicious purposes.

2.2 Intelligibility vs. Native-like Pronunciation

In looking at pronunciation, it is crucial to understand two important concepts: *intelligibility* and *native-like pronunciation*. In phonetics, intelligibility is a measure of how comprehendible speech is or the degree to which speech can be understood. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes intelligibility, nor is there an agreed-upon way of measuring it (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

According to Morley (1991:488), as cited in Hismanoglu, 2006, "*intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence*". For this reason, English language teachers should incorporate pronunciation into their courses and expect students to pronounce English words correctly.

On the other hand, native-like pronunciation refers to pronunciation made by non-native speakers, which sounds as accurate as that of an L1 speaker.

2.3 Suprasegmental and Segmental

Mutual intelligibility or overall comprehensibility of L2 speech has been regarded as a primary goal in recent ESL pronunciation pedagogy. Since suprasegmental features play a crucial role in communication (see Munro & Derwing,1995), such features as sentence stress, rhythm, pitch, and intonation receive much pedagogical attention in current pedagogy of English pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). In other words, the native-like accuracy of segmental features (i.e., consonants and vowels) tends to receive less pedagogical attention. However, it is not necessarily reasonable to underestimate native-like accuracy in teaching pronunciation to college students in ESL settings.

2.4 General Views of Teaching Pronunciation in Some Countries

In some countries, pronunciation is totally ignored. Maniruzzaman 2008, observes that at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Bangladesh, an English pronunciation course or English pronunciation as a component in the English course is hardly given any considerable place at all. Cheng, 1998, on the other hand, notes that in China, an English phonetics course is simply left to chance or given no room. Although in some countries, pronunciation is taught, it is given little attention, for example in Mexico, as observed by Dalton, 1997, cited in Maniruzzaman (2008), in Mexico, pronunciation is described as "*the Cinderella of language teaching*"; which means an often-low level of emphasis is placed on this very important language skill. Thus, it is not surprising that in some countries, it is simply overlooked; Wei and Zhou, 2002, said that English pronunciation is arbitrarily overlooked in Thailand.

Despite all these views, pronunciation is still very important. Vernon (2011) said that teachers must teach pronunciation, though it is an area of language teaching that many English teachers avoid.

3. Aim of the Study

The study involves the reading of two different magazine articles:
1) identify common pronunciation problems among six college students;
2) to conduct two different activities (treatments) to help the students overcome their mispronunciation; and
3) to find out whether the treatments employed helped in resolving the respondent's mispronunciation.

Therefore, the aim of the study is to identify common pronunciation problems among the respondents and whether the treatments employed helped in overcoming the problem.

4. Method

The study was conducted among six college students from a local Institution of higher learning. The students were randomly selected from a group of 30 students. All the students selected for this study had average proficiency levels in the English language. A one-group pre-test – post-test method and a semi-structured interview were used to collect data.

4.1 Procedure

The six students were asked to read a text twice. They were given a text that was contextual rather than isolated sentences. The reading was done separately and was recorded. The researcher listened to the recordings and identified the mispronunciations made by the students. Based on the mispronunciation, an analysis is made to determine the types of mispronunciation and the possible reasons for them. Then, two different treatments were employed to remedy the problem: i) drills and ii) tongue twisters.

The *first treatment* involves three different drills: saturation drill, word-association drill and reading drill. The respondents were drilled for 5 days focusing on the eight words that they had mispronounced.

The *second treatment* consisted of four tongue twisters. The respondents were asked to read the tongue twisters 20 times a day for five days. The tongue twisters were specially constructed to match the phonetic sound of the mispronounced words. According to Fangzhi (1998), tongue twisters can increase student's motivation in a pronunciation class, and this is a significant factor in pronunciation.

After the treatment period, the respondents were asked to read the reading text again. All their reading were recorded and analyzed. However, the reading was not done immediately but three days later; this was done to prevent respondents from pronouncing words out of memory rather than from their ability to pronounce the words correctly because of the treatments.

Following the posttest, three participants from the six students were selected to conduct an individual semi-structured interview. Each participant was asked five questions related to the two treatments carried out.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 What Are the Words Mispronounced by the Students?

All the respondents had pronunciation problems; they were unable to pronounce twelve words. However, only eight common mispronounced words were used for this study.
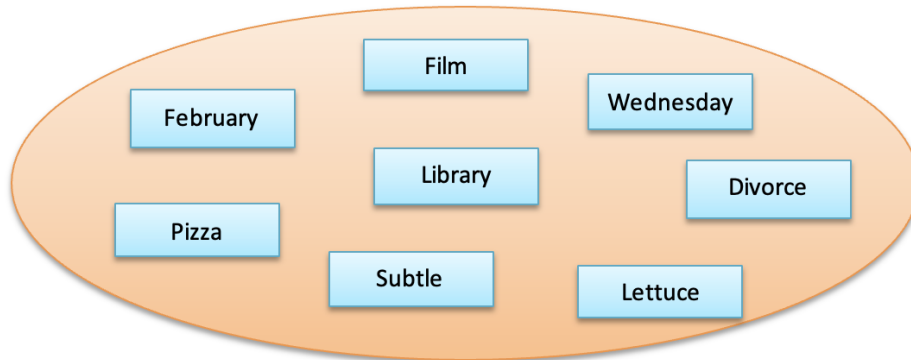

Table 1: Eight common words mispronounced by the students

No.	Word	Student	Pretest Pronunciation	Post-test Pronunciation
1.	Film	A,B,C,D,E,F (6)	/fee-lum /	/ fihlm / (6)
2.	Library	B,D (2)	/lai-ber-ri/	/lai-brer-ree/ (6)
		A,C,E,F (4)	/lai-be-ri/	
3.	February	B,C,F (3)	/feb-yoo-er-ri/	/feb-roo-er-ree/ (6)
		A,D,E (3)	/feb-loo-er-ri/	
4.	Pizza	A,B,C,D,F (5)	/pee-za/	/peet-sa / pit-sa/ (6)
		E (1)	/pit-za/	
5.	Subtle	A,C,D,F (4)	/sub-tuhl/	/suh-tuhl/ (6)
		B,E (2)	/sub- tɛl/	
6.	Wednesday	A,B,C,D,E,F (5)	/wed-nuhs-dey/	/wenz-dey/ (6)
7.	Lettuce	B.D (2)	/let-yous/	/let-is/ (6)
		A,C,E (3)	/ˈlɛktʃə/	
8.	Divorce	E,F (2)	/dai-vors/	/dih-vohrs/ (6)
		A,B,C,D (4)	/di-wɔː/	

Table 2 below shows the Pretest and Posttest results.

5.2 Reasons for Mispronunciation

Thirty words from the text were selected to assess the students' pronunciation. Of the 30 words, the students had problems mispronouncing 12 words (40%), while 18 (60%) words were pronounced correctly. Of the 12 words which were mispronounced, 8 words were commonly mispronounced by all the 6 students.

The analysis of the reading text indicated that there were several reasons why the respondents mispronounced the eight common words:

1) problem with short and long vowel sounds,
2) ii) problems between /s/ and /z/ sounds,
3) using /lum/ or /l∧m/ sounds instead of /lm/,
4) overstressing the initial syllable,
5) mispronouncing words using wrong syllables,
6) overstressing the ending syllable,
7) syllable deletion and,
8) influenced by the national language, while others are influenced by mother-tongue interference.

5.3 Did the Pronunciation of the Respondents Improve Following the Treatments Given to Them?

The treatments were carried out for five days. The first treatment was pronunciation practice. The respondents were asked to model the pronunciation of a native speaker (recorded). They model the pronunciation of the eight words ten times for five days. Each day, they were asked to pronounce the words to their partner and the researcher at the end of the session. The second treatment was carried out concurrently with the first treatment. The treatments consist of three different types of drills. The three drills were administrated one after another each day for five days.

According to Senal, 2006, "*there are many useful drills for purifying and teaching the correct and accurate pronunciation of the utterances and words.*" Therefore, drills were used as one of the treatments to help the respondents to overcome their pronunciation problems. The final treatment was the use of tongue twisters; four tongue twisters were used to help the respondents practice the problematic phonemes. The tongue twisters were read 50 times by the respondents, ten times a day, for five days.

Since the treatments were conducted concurrently, it is only appropriate to see the effect of all the treatments at the end of the treatment period and not after every treatment. Thus, to see the effect of the treatments thoroughly, the researcher would compare the reading and pronunciation before and after the treatment period. The analysis of the respondents' readings after the treatment period reveals that the treatment had a positive effect on the pronunciation. After the treatment all 6 students were able to pronounce all the 8 words correctly. Therefore, based on all these analyses the two treatments had had a positive impact on the pronunciation of the respondents. The improvement was 100%. All students were able to pronounce all the words correctly.

5.4 Interview Evidence

All three participants said that the pronunciation drills and tongue twisters had help them to pronounce the difficult words correctly. This statement is justified through the interview data below.

Participant A mentioned:

"I could not pronounce some of the words in the article correctly, but after the pronunciation drills, which we did many times, I was able to say the difficult words correctly. The tongue twisters also help me with the pronunciation. First, it was not easy to say all the words in tongue twisters, but with some help, I was able to do it."

Participant B said:

"I find the tongue twister to be interesting, hard to say initially compared to the pronunciation drills but later I could say it well. I believe both these activities help me to say the words correctly."

Participant C opined:

"It was so boring to repeat saying some words so many times. I said these words until I was able to say it correctly. The tongue twisters were also difficult to say. Although I did not like this activity later, I realize I was able to say correctly the words I cannot pronounce properly. So, I think these two activities have helped me to say words correctly."

Based on the responses of the three participants, there is clear evidence that both treatments had a positive impact on the students' pronunciation. Although they found the tongue twister activity to be difficult initially later, they admitted that the activity had helped them with their pronunciation.

6. Conclusion

This study provided interesting results regarding the students' mispronunciation. The analysis of the pre-reading showed that the students had problems pronouncing 12 words, of which 8 words were commonly mispronounced by all six students. The reading text consists of 250 words, and comparing that to the number of mispronounced words by the students, the most being 12 words, is rather insignificant.

Nevertheless, mispronunciation, no matter how minor, is definitely a hindrance to communication. Therefore, two treatments using very common techniques were able to overcome this problem. A close study of the mispronunciation showed that the mispronunciation was more suprasegmental than segmental. Thus, the treatments were appropriate to address suprasegmental features since suprasegmental features play a crucial role in communication, such features as sentence stress, rhythm, pitch, and intonation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996).

The treatments indeed helped correct the pronunciation effectively. The effectiveness of the treatment was also evident through the interview responses of the participants. However, there are limitations to this study as the students involved are significantly small and the treatment period is rather short. Further research can be conducted involving more students and longer treatment periods.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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