

BIDIALECTALISM AND ENGLISH WORD PRONUNCIATION: EVIDENCE FROM IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effect of bidialectalism as a natural cultural phenomenon on Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation ability. This study tried to determine the extent to which being a bidialectal learner affects the pronunciation ability of advanced learners. To answer this question, 40 Advanced language learners in Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Rasht and Tehran were randomly selected via administration of an OPT exam to 100 language learners in each city. Then, they were divided into two groups of 20 participants each. Participants in the Rasht group were bidialectal which means they knew a local dialect in addition to standard Persian. And the Tehran group was consisting of monodialectal participants who just knew standard Persian. An oral test of pronunciation was administered to both groups, the recorded voices of participants were assessed carefully. The data retrieved from the two groups was analyzed through calculating a t-test. The results indicated that the means of the two groups were significantly different.

Keywords: EFL learners, OPT, Pronunciation Ability, Bidialectalism

INTRODUCTION

An important aspect of language proficiency is to make sure the production of understandable pronunciation of language speakers. Fraser (2000a) claims that language teachers in ESL/EFL classes need provide courses and materials for their learners to help them improve their pronunciation as effectiveness in teaching pronunciation is an important aspect of teaching a language. She also believes that there exists a need for effective materials with a high level of quality and in particular computer-based materials with audio demonstrations for learners of ESL/EFL pronunciation, so that they can both self-access to this material as well as employing them in classes where the teacher needs this kind of support. She states that research in second language education should be concerned with providing a suitable methodology of teaching pronunciation and not just with the importance of teaching pronunciation (Fraser, 2000b). Learners as well as teachers must take roles in learning and teaching methodologies must adopt new objectives to highlight this important issue. Teachers must take responsibility as pronunciation trainers and learners must use their own initiative to learn. Morley (1991) argues that teaching methodologies must change from focusing on segmental elements of pronunciation to supra-segmental elements of pronunciation and from linguistic competence to communicative competence. She also adds that one of the primary purposes of teaching pronunciation in any language course is what he calls intelligible pronunciation which is far less than perfect pronunciation but a good means of sending the message across. Intelligible pronunciation is claimed to be one crucial component of communicative competence. She calls for changing the view toward pronunciation as the accomplishment of perfect pronunciation should no longer be the objective and Instead, he

encourages setting more realistic goals which are applicable and reasonable for the communication needs of the learner.

Therefore, one can infer that it is vitally important that English learners who are learning English for international communication learn to speak it as intelligibly and comprehensibly as possible in order to be understood because as it is obvious language is used for the purpose of communication and oral channel is perceived well in case of understandable pronunciation.

It is also vitally important to learn how to understand people with different accents because when speaking in natural conditions learners face different accents. In this regard Rajadurai (2001) suggests one important aspect of including listening and speaking in syllabus design is to teach pronunciation as an integral non-avoidable component of oral communication.

Considering the importance of meaningful communication and its relation to intelligibility of pronunciation, it is not wise to limit pronunciation teaching just to pronunciation courses or even to listening/speaking classes whereas teachers should always squeeze pronunciation into their classes no matter what skill or sub-skill they are teaching (Rajaduari, 2001). They are advised to do so in order to increase learners' awareness of the significance of pronunciation as an integral part of learning English as a second or foreign language. In this case they can provide some opportunities for proper practice, and encourage and advice them as they aim to use the language beyond the scope of classroom.

The problem of English pronunciation seems to exist even after years of formal English language learning. Fraser (2000a) believes this often results in difficulties when trying to find a job in an English Speaking country.

The fault which most severely hinders the communication process in EFL/ESL settings is pronunciation, not lack of vocabulary or using wrong grammar (Hinofotis & Baily, 1980). Davis (1999) stated that a highly significant area of concern and a top priority for ESL learners after completion of elementary English courses is pronunciation. It is important to make a distinction between pronunciation and speaking because it is sometimes wrongly applied interchangeably. Pronunciation is sub-skill of speaking. Fraser (2000a) claims that ability to speak English requires a number of sub-skills which between them pronunciation receives the highest degree of importance. She also argues that having a proper pronunciation, a speaker will be intelligible although he may have other errors. On the other hand a speaker with poor pronunciation will not be easily understood, despite accuracy in other areas. Despite of its importance, teaching pronunciation has always been neglected by teachers and syllabus designers.

The purpose of this article is to study one of the factors that affect pronunciation and also to discuss the degree to which personal attributes of learners can affect their ability to learn pronunciation. Most important than all mentioned above this study is hoped to shed light on the area of teaching pronunciation and actions to be taken in early childhood in order to train potentially talented learners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Years ago while Grammar- translation method was used in teaching English, teaching pronunciation was almost ignored or hardly ever taught (Florez, 1998). Afterwards in the 1950s and 1960s, with growth in popularity of audio-lingual method, pronunciation took more of importance and emphasis. So that drilling of individual sound segments was emphasized and contrasting word pairs were put into practice. All these exercises were originated from bahaviouristic psychology. However, the criticism to this method was the

lack of focus on rhythm and intonation of sentences and enough practice of realistic conversations (Fraser, 2000a, p. 32). Instead of focusing on what actually happens in real world dialogues, learners spent laborious hours of parrot like repetition of individual sounds and sound in combination with other sounds in the language laboratories.

Fraser (2000a) and Bray (1995) claim that along with emergence and development of the communicative method in the 1970s, teacher came to the understanding that pronunciation be disassociated with any link to the drilling practices of the audio-lingual method. They understood they need to choose better alternatives for teaching pronunciation.

Bray (1995) believes that teacher had two different options, one in which they could teach articulatory phonetics along with pictures of the human mouth and tongue and trying to show various positions and other one they could not decide not to include any explicit instruction in English phonology at all. So we can conclude that there is no way of teaching pronunciation within communicative method. With the growth of the communicative method's popularity in a most of ESL communities, no or little attention was given to training in-service teachers for teaching pronunciation. Fraser (2000a) also claims that many language teachers still have major difficulties dealing with teaching pronunciation, and reasons that their training courses had not given them sufficient instructions regarding this issue.

Along with the emergence of more holistic approaches in ESL instruction, more advocates are there to believe in pronunciation to be addressed within the context of real communication. Regarding this issue, Otlowski (1998) believes that Language learners can learn to master the pronunciation of English if pronunciation is taught as an integral part of the oral communication class not as a discrete sub-skill.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is aimed to investigate the effect of bidialectalism on the ability of learners from different areas to learn English word pronunciation. The main purpose of the study is to provide answer for the following question:

1. Does bidialectalism affect Iranian EFL learners' English words pronunciation?

HYPOTHESIS

H0: Bidialectalism has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' English words pronunciation.

METHOD

The method of this study is described as follow:

In this study two groups of Iranian Advanced learners participated. Each group consisted of 20 female learners aged 18-40 studying English in Kish Institute of Science and Technology, One group in Rasht branch and the other in Tehran. In order to make sure of the homogeneity of the participants a proficiency test called OPT was administered between 100 learners in Tehran and 100 learners in Rasht. Participants with the score one SD above the Mean have been selected. 20 participants were assigned to each group randomly. The group from Rasht knows standard Persian as well as their local dialect Guilaki. In order to make sure of this issue a questionnaire has been provided along with an interview held by two experts. Therefore it was reassured that all the participants are bidialectal which means they know both Guilaki and standard Persian. The same procedure has been done in Tehran to make sure that the Tehrani group is monodialectal which means they know standard Persian and no other dialect. The participants in both groups apart from being homogeneous were exposed to

the identical system of language learning on one hand and on the other hand have already received lessons about pronunciation and are also familiar with English sound segments.

Material and Procedure

The material used in this study were in two sorts; 1) Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which is a standardized exam so reliability of the test is not needed to be tested; 2) a test used to determine the ability of the learners in pronunciation The reliability of the test was estimated 0.69 through Chronbach Alpha coefficient. The procedure of the study was as follow:

Both groups were given the aforementioned pronunciation test, and their voices have been recorded and then been phonemic transcribed. In order to make sure of the correctness of transcription 3 different raters listened to the voices and checked the transcription.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data gathered from the current study were analyzed via an independent T-test between the score of Tehrani and Guilani Group. The results are discussed as follow:

RESULTS

Table 1. The summary of descriptive analysis for the data related to the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Guilani	20	15.1	1.7
Tehrani	20	11.6	1.9

As table (1) indicates, the mean of the Guilani group (the experimental group) is higher than that of the Tehrani group (the control group). Accordingly, the number of participants in each group was 20 (NG=20; NT=20).

Table 2. The summary of t-test between the posttest scores of experimental and the control group of the study

<i>Variance</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Mean difference</i>
Equal Variances Assumed	5.9	3.45

According to table (2), the result of t-test ($t_{obs} = 5.9, p < .05$) yielded significant difference between the Guilani and Tehrani groups. The obtained t-observed is higher than the critical value of t in the t-student table with the degree of freedom of 38 ($df = 38$) and the level of significance of 0.05 (Sig. = 0.05) for the two-tailed (null) hypothesis as to be 2.01. Such a result ($t_{obs} > t_{crit}$) rejects the null hypothesis of the current study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As observed in the previous section the result of this research indicated that bidialectalism affects Iranian EFL learners' pronunciation ability. It is believed that this phenomenon is due to the existence of the same sound segments in Guilaki as well as English which these sound segments are absent in standard Persian. Therefore, although the proficiency of participants in both groups was the same the result of pronunciation test showed a great difference.

Learning pronunciation is affected by a series of different issues. An important one is the native dialect of the learners. Through this study, it was confirmed that existence of sound segments specially vowels in the first language of the learner has a major significance in learning the pronunciation of the second language. In order to test this hypothesis the pronunciation of the vowel schwa was experimented. In Guilaki the sound segment, schwa exists and you can find it in many Guilaki words whereas original Farsi doesn't include this vowel. After testing both groups and assessing the result by three different expert rater, it was understood that Guilani learners have less difficulty pronouncing schwa. In fact they don't find it difficult at all. In the case of Tehranis on the other hand the story is totally different. In fact it was proved that having schwa in the native dialect of Guilanis enhances their ability in pronouncing it subconsciously.

The result of this study can have some pedagogical implication as well. If at the beginning of the EFL programs potential learners were classified based on their knowledge of language and background data, they could receive some additional courses in advanced to language course. This course can include some sound practices designed locally for those who their mother tongues lack sound segments.

As a future perspective regarding the present study, researchers are advised to expand the scope of this research study to other areas of the world with bigger groups and find out more problematic areas of pronunciation in order to make a proper package for further sound training of learners. The more to be done in this respect the easier it will be to teach pronunciation afterwards.

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