STRESS OUT OF STRESS: STRESSING UNACCENTED SYLLABLES' DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

Grammatical knowledge for the proper use of English language is important but accent is rather more significant through which the learners could express their emotions and thoughts such as love, anger, apology, thanks, complaints, etc., intelligibly. This participatory investigative study has been conducted on 80 M.A English students, who studied a core course on "Phonetics & Phonology", to find out what are the major phonological difficulties of advanced level students even after attending a specialized course on 'Phonetics & Phonology'. The students had to take a text-based oral test before and after attending the offered course. Since the focus of the study was on the improper use of accented and unaccented syllables; a text comprising majority of two syllabic words (adjectives, nouns, and verbs) was used to find out whether students could properly make a distinction, while pronouncing, between adjectives or nouns and verbs. The results of the study (50 mispronounced words) show that a majority of the students is unable to distinguish verb from noun or adjective in the connected speech and appear to mix up verbs with adjectives or nouns. It may be due to over use of first language interference, lack of the application of phonological rules, less practice of reading phonetic script and irregular speaking practice of the target language in academic and social life. The study recommends that there should be tangible efforts by higher education institutions to introduce some courses on 'Phonetics and Phonology' at post graduate level to promote refined pronunciation with a focus on accent among the students.

Keywords: Phonetics and Phonology, stress, accented, unaccented, grammatical knowledge, syllable

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation instruction was absent from the second/foreign language (L2) classroom for a long time due to the conventional beliefs that pronunciation is not important, cannot be taught, and can be "picked up" by learners. These beliefs have been questioned and pronunciation teaching has undergone a shift, so that nowadays, its frameworks may encompass not only linguistic competence, but also discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (Morley, 1994). Hinofitis and Baily (1980, pp.124-125) reported that up to a certain proficiency standard, the fault which most severely impairs the communication process in EFL/ESL learners is pronunciation, rather than vocabulary or grammar. Their arguments make pronunciation more important in improving the communicative competence of learners.

The important view nowadays, of employability, is considered to be oral communication and refined pronunciation, with appropriate accent, is also viewed as successful as access to job market. With the growing importance of English as a global language students at higher education seem to try hard to speak English with native like proficiency but mostly get confused when they are to make a difference between what is correct and incorrect accent of

various words. Almost all higher education courses, pertaining to English language, emphasize that the students of this level must be able to have good oral skills in English language and those who go for degree in English language are expected much more than the other post graduates. As observed by Pennington (1994) the value of pronunciation instruction lies in the fact that it can help learners develop their inter language phonology by giving them "the perceptual and the productive experience they need to re-conceptualize the performance targets while offering motivation to change and social experiences to develop a new value set.

Despite the ongoing usage of English language every second student of advanced level appears to be using or trying to use refined English but without any proper knowledge of Phonetics and Phonology or in simple term, pronunciation and accent. Our educational set up provides fewer opportunities to graduates to interact in English language with teachers or peers due to syllabus completion compulsion, overcrowded classes and examination system, etc.

The students speak English without any effort to know the governing rules of English pronunciation (Phonetics and Phonology) and reach the conclusion that they are either speaking NAM (North American) or British English. Further they are not in the position to understand the differences between accent and pronunciation and get both the terms mixed which creates confusion for them when they are actually exposed to native speakers or native speakers like English. The speech of non-native English speakers may exhibit pronunciation characteristics that result from such speakers imperfectly learning the pronunciation of English, either by transferring the phonological rules from their mother tongue into their English speech ("interference") or by implementing strategies similar to those used in primary language acquisition.

They may also create innovative pronunciations for English sounds not found in the speaker's first language (Non-Native Pronunciations of English ¶1). The students at higher education level, because of the less understanding of Phonological rules, are found unaware about the first, second or third syllable stress and speak English in monotone which presents a clumsy accent of English language.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to find out that to what extent the students receiving higher education (with English as major) are able to pronounce the two syllabic words correctly even after studying a course on 'Phonetics & Phonology' and are able to make distinction between accented and unaccented syllables so far as nouns or adjectives and verbs are concerned.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The participatory investigative study has been conducted on 80 M.A English students who studied a three credit hours course on "Phonetics & Phonology" during their first semester of M.A English programme, to find out what are the major phonological difficulties of students whose mother language is not English even after attending a course on 'Phonetics & Phonology'. For this students were exposed to a text-based oral test before and after attending the offered course and test score (mispronounced words) was compared for findings and recommendations.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

There have been various researches in the area of native language interference on the target language as stated by Baljit Bhela (1991). For instance, Dulay *et al* (1982) define interference as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language. Lott (1983: 256) defines interference as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue'. But it is also important to know that how do the students of advanced level, whose major is English, speak English language after having completed fourteen years of schooling with eight years of learning English as compulsory subject. Further it is significant to know that despite having studied course on 'Phonetics and Phonology' they are able to stress words in accordance with the imparted Phonological rules or not.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rhythm is hierarchical in nature in language, as it is in music (Nespor, Shukl**a**, & Mehler, 2010). In English teaching practice the study of pronunciation basically concentrates on the segmental aspects of English: the practice of phoneme contrasts and phoneme sequences. The practice of English stress and rhythm has been traditionally neglected despite the existence of (i) a number of descriptions in an English teaching framework of English word stress (Kingdon, 1958, Fudge, 1984), sentence stress (Albrow, 1968) and rhythm (Classe, 1939, Brown, 1977, Couper-Kuhlen, 1986), and (ii) practice materials (Guierre, 1970, Tibbits, 1967, O'Connor. 1959, and Arnold and Tooley, 1971-72, amongst others).

Stress and rhythm are suprasegmental aspects that give the overall shape to the word or sequence. If easy intelligibility is to be achieved, it is important to give words their correct accentual pattern and rhythm. Thus, the pronunciation of a word with the inappropriate accentual and rhythmic pattern makes the word unintelligible not only because the misplaced main stress distorts the shape of the word, but also because there is no un-stressing of the other syllables with the consequent phonetic reductions. The inappropriate pronunciation of a single word, however, is not vital for intelligibility since in most cases the right form of the word can be reconstructed from the context (Sabater, 1991).

Most analyses, such as Halle and Vergnaud (1987) and Hayes (1995), assume that English words are first syllabified, and then word stress is assigned according to the syllable patterns. For syllabification, most analyses follow Kahn (1976) and assume the Maximal Onset rule, according to which intervocalic consonants are syllabified as the onset of the following vowel as far as is allowed by the given language.

Awareness of proper lexical (Tepperman & Narayanan, 2005) stress is very important to students of a foreign language. In English, for instance, misplaced syllabic stress can alter a word's part of speech (in the case of "rebel" or "insult") or even change the word's meaning entirely (as with "content" or "contract"). Brosnahan & Malmberg (1970), state that the traditional classification of languages using stress is into those with a fixed stress and those with a free stress. In the former the occurrence of the primary stress is limited to a particular syllable in multisyllabic words.

Bowen (1972) proposes 3 realistic goals for the teaching of pronunciation: (a) ability to communicate orally with ease and efficiency; (b) ability to produce the basic contrasts of the target language sound system; and (c) ability to understand fluent speech as produced by native speakers. Further the supremacy of sound practice and the neglect of the communicative element becomes clear if we analyze the list of activities provided by Celce-Murcia (1987) and Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996, p. 8-10), which are still being used to teach

pronunciation: (a) listen and imitate, (b) minimal pair drill, (c) contextualized minimal pairs, (d) tongue twisters, (e) developmental approximation drills, (f) practice of vowel shifts and stress shifts related by affixation, (g) phonetic training, (h) visual aids, (i) reading aloud/recitation, and (j) recording of learner's production.

Acton (1984) makes a more comprehensive proposal by describing a method to help fluent non-native speakers of English to improve their pronunciation of the target language. The author believes that changing the pronunciation of fluent language learners is harder and he suggests a tailored 48-hour program directed at professionals who intend to work on their pronunciation. But Silveira (2002) feels that Acton's proposal is suitable for highly motivated learners that are already convinced of the importance of having intelligible pronunciation. Unfortunately, the reality of most language classrooms is rather different, not only in terms of motivation, but also in relation to the sophisticated facilities and amount of time allocated to pronunciation required by the method.

Celce-Murcia (1987) observes that the traditional pronunciation teaching techniques (a)-(f) seem to be inadequate as a starting point, but that they might be relevant for motivated learners who seem unable to master certain sounds presented through communicative tasks. She also suggests that pronunciation teachers should use appropriate poems and song lyrics and even play-extracts in their classes, since such authentic materials can on tribute to showing the communicative value of pronunciation.

Davenport & Hannahs (2005) say that in a sequence of syllables making up a word, one syllable is always more prominent than the others. This more prominent syllable is said to bear stress. So, in '**pa,**rrot' the first syllable is more prominent than the second, i.e., is stressed (shown in the bold); the second syllable is said to be 'unstressed'. In 'ra,**ccoon**', on the other hand, it is the last syllable which is louder and longer than the first, i.e., bears the stress. Silveira (2002) has put forward/suggested curriculum content and teaching procedures for pronunciation instruction that could be utilized while teaching pronunciation.

The speakers may face stress problem due to the interference of their own language which does not have verbal delivery the way English language suggests, i.e., Subject as Noun is pronounced as "Mazmoon", in Urdu and as verb "Nishana Banana", but without any first or second syllable stress. On the other hand in English language these words are stressed as: **SUB**ject (noun), and sub**JECT** as verb. It may be a natural tendency of first language Urdu/Punjabi speakers to use tones without denoting stressed syllables which is the prime cause of confusion. It is may be due to basic dichotomy between syllable- and stress-timing which was largely taken for granted until various phoneticians, on the basis of measurements in different languages, showed that isochrony was not present in the signal. It was shown that interstress intervals in English vary in duration proportionally to the number of syllables they contain, so that the duration of the intervals between consecutive stresses is not constant (Shen & Peterson 1962; O'Connor 1965; Lea 1974).

For Pakistani speakers it can be difficult to use stress consistently to denote stressed words in English, and it can also be difficult to convey such emotions as surprise or interest via intonation. Ellis (1997: 51) refers to interference as 'transfer', which he says is 'the influence that the learner'sL1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2'. He argues that transfer is governed by learners' perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L2 learning. In learning a target language, learners construct their own interim rules (Selinker, 1971, Seligar, 1988 and Ellis, 1997) with the use of their L1 knowledge, but only when they

believe it will help them in the learning task or when they have become sufficiently proficient in the L2 for transfer to be possible.

Table 1. Suggested curriculum content and teaching procedures for pronunciation instruction (Silveira, 2002)

Pronunciation content	*Teaching procedures*
(a) sound discrimination (vowels and consonants);	a) connecting the pronunciation material with the language class or work environment;
(b) word and sentence stress;	(b) using visual aids such as mouth and lip illustration of sound articulation;
(c) rhythm;	(c) offering explicit instruction about pronunciation, including phonetic transcription;
(d) intonation;	(d) comparing the L1 and the L2;
(e) reduction;	(e) constant recycling of the pronunciation points;
(f) linking;	(f) providing learners with rule induction and deduction activities;
(g) deletion;	(g) listen and repeat activities;
(h) substitution;	(h) minimal pair drills;
(i) non-verbal behavior;	(i) contextualized minimal pairs;
(j) connection to	(j) tongue twisters, rhymes, vocabulary and grammar; poems, etc.
(k) inflectional endings (-s and –ed);	(k) silent practice;
(l) consonant clusters; (l) reading aloud, recitation;	
(m) practice of vowel shifts and stress shifts related to affixation. (m) recording learners' speech samples;	
	(n) practicing at the word, sentence and paragraph level;
	(o) developing of self-monitoring strategies;
	(p) contrasting spelling and sounds;
	(q) working in pairs or groups so that learners receive peer feedback;
	(r) Working with naturalistic speech samples as used by native speakers.

But one researcher concerned with the effects of pronunciation instruction is Neufeld (1977, 1979). He attempted to design research procedures that focused on specific psycholinguistic issues, and to control for the interference of extra linguistic factors. The results he obtained

in one of these studies (1977) suggest that many adult learners, exposed to instruction on intonation and articulation of 3 unknown languages, were capable of reproducing lengthy utterances of these languages at a native-like level. Something interesting about the instructional procedure tested was that the subjects were not allowed to vocally produce the utterances being taught during the first lessons. All the subjects could do at that moment was complete the discrimination exercises, and in the second half of the program, they had to whisper the utterances.

It is important that pronunciation teaching should be the prime focus for the students who take up English as major. As pointed out by Pennington and Richards (1986), the area of pronunciation instruction is in need of studies that generate "material and techniques representing authentic phonological productions in real communication" (p.220); as well as studies that are controlled and succeed in showing the effects of pronunciation instruction "in the context of information structure and interaction … or in the context of real-life psychological and social concerns".

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed at investigating/tracking the pronunciation lapses of the students of M. A English and to find out that to what extent these students, when involved in different formal or informal situations in the classroom to speak/read the sample text having two syllabic words of English language, can pronounce two syllabic words in accordance with the Phonological rules.

The main focus was on the pronunciation of two syllabic words (adjectives, nouns, or verbs) to find whether students could pronounce them with proper stress or not. Pre and post test findings show that most of the students are not able to pronounce two syllabic words properly and they mix verb with noun or adjective. Following is the list of such two syllabic words that have been traced mispronounced by the students:

The results show that a majority of the students has been found unable to pronounce two syllabic words in proper accent and they mix up verbs with nouns or adjectives in the connected speech (list of some identified words is given above). They were not able to distinguish the category of words and pronounced in such a way that conveyed the wrong meanings to the listener.

There could be many other reasons for this wrong accent but it seems that the pronunciation pattern of their mother tongue created problems for them as there are different ways to pronounce Urdu, Punjabi (spoken in the province of Punjab, Pakistan) and English words.

The study further finds out that less practice in speaking English language outside the classroom does not provide them understanding of the rules of 'Phonetics & Phonology' because such non-English speaking environment does not make them practise rules in their conversation. At the same time they are less exposed to some other courses of this nature which could further their enhancement in this particular area. Moreover there is scarcity of good speakers of English who could practically equip them to demonstrate the assimilated rules of 'Phonetics & Phonology' in their social life.

It has also been found out that there are fewer teachers who themselves set models of standard English for post graduate students and consequently students don't find opportunity, on regular basis, to practice and enhance proper stress pattern.

List of 50 identified words (Nouns, Adjectives, and Verbs)

Sr. No	Ordinary Script	Phonetic Script	Sr. No	Ordinary Script	Phonetic Script
1	Abstract	æbstrækt (n)	27	Convert	kɒnvɜ:t(n)
2	Abstract	əbstrækt (v)	28	Convert	kənvɜ:t(v)
3	Abuse	əbju:s (n)	29	Excess	ekses(n)
4	Abuse	əbju:z (v)	30	Excess	ikses(v)
5	Accent	æksent (n)	31	Excise	eksaɪz(n)
6	Accent	əksent (v)	32	Excise	iksaɪz(v)
7	Access	ækses(n)	33	Excuse	iksju:s(n)
8	Access	əkses(v)	34	Excuse	iksju:z(v)
9	Advert	ædv ɜ:t(n)	35	Present	prezənt(n)
10	Advert	ədv ɜ:t(v)	36	Present	prizənt(v)
11	Affix	æfiks(n)	37	Produce	prodju:s(n)
12	Affix	əfiks(v)	38	Produce	prədju:s(v)
13	Alloy	æloɪ(n)	39	Project	prodʒekt(n)
14	Alloy	əloɪ(v)	40	Project	prədʒekt(v)
15	Ally	æl aɪ(n)	41	Rejoin	ri:dʒoɪn(n)
16	Ally	əl aɪ(v)	42	Rejoin	ridʒoɪn(v)
17	Concept	kɒnsept(n)	43	Reject	ri:dʒekt(n)
18	Concept	kənsept(v)	44	Reject	ridʒekt(v)
19	Conduct	kɒndʌkt(n)	45	Research	ri:sɜ:tʃ(n)
20	Conduct	kəndʌkt(v)	46	Research	risɜ:tʃ(v)
21	Conflict	Kɒnflikt(n)	47	Subject	sʌbdʒikt(n)
22	Conflict	kənflikt(v)	48	Subject	səbdʒekt(v)
23	Contest	kɒntest(n)	49	Transport	trænspɔ:t(n)
24	Contest	kəntest(v)	50	Transport	trænspɔ:t(v)
25	Contrast	kɒntra:st(n)			
26	Contrast	ka:ntra:st(v)			

IMPLICATIONS

In light of the findings, the study draws the following implications:

1. Higher education institutes/institutions should include courses on 'Phonetics & Phonology' as a compulsory portion in the scheme of studies.

2. There must be due weight age of viva voce and classroom interaction in the prescribed syllabi at higher education. If already given its weightage should be handsomely increased.

3. Considering the modern educational challenges there must bed focus on English language/oral communication with an aim to improve accent and pronunciation of the students at higher education level.

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4. Students of master level in the subject of English should be given ample opportunities in and out side the class to ensure assimilation of the rules of 'Phonetics & Phonology' as well as should be offered more courses of this nature.

5. At master level teachers having refined pronunciation should be appointed and having update knowledge of 'Phonetics & Phonology'.

6. Efforts should be made to create English speaking environment both in and outside the classroom to get the students speak English fluently.

7. It should be made mandatory for pot graduate class students to speak English in the classrooms to promote good speaking skills' habits.

8. Higher education institutes/institutions should provide videos and audio assistance to students to improve their accent and pronunciation.

9. Use of mother tongue in the classroom should be discouraged at least at higher education general and in M.A English class in particular.

10. There must be English speaking test before admission, especially for M.A English students, at all the higher education institutions.

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