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PRONUNCIATION ERRORS AMONG MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES IN ENGLISH FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

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Abstract:

In a country where there is a diverse range of races and cultures, the influence of the first language comes almost naturally when using English as a second language. This influence has created a negative transfer which has affected learners' communicative competence as well as performance. This study intends to investigate the pronunciation errors among undergraduates in a Malaysian university and explain the mispronunciations by comparing the phonetic system of English and Malay It is hoped that the results of this study will eventually provide some insights to producing effective strategies for teaching pronunciation that can help ESL learners to improve their oral proficiency skills and thus meeting their personal and professional needs.

Keywords:

Pronunciation Errors, Oral Communication, Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

One of the fundamental conditions for language proficiency is that language learners have a comprehensible pronunciation. According to Fraser (2000), ESL/EFL teachers should be supplied with courses and tools to assist them in increasing their efficacy when teaching pronunciation. She continues, "There is also a demand for high-quality, effective materials, particularly computer-based materials with audio demonstrations, for ESL/EFL pronunciation learners, both for self-access and for use in classes when the teacher requires this type of support." Additionally, she argued that research in second language education should focus on the methods of teaching pronunciation rather than on the value of teaching pronunciation (Fraser, 2000). Both teachers and learners must adapt to new roles, and instructional methods must adapt to new objectives. Teachers must function as pronunciation coaches, and students must be proactive in their learning. The teaching approaches must shift from emphasising segmental to supra-segmental parts of pronunciation, and from linguistic to communicative ability (Morley, 1991). One of the key goals of any training is to teach understandable pronunciation — not perfect pronunciation. Pronunciation intelligence is a necessary component of communication ability (Morley, 1991). The pursuit of flawless pronunciation should no longer be the goal. Rather than that, Morley advocates for more realistic goals that are practical, applicable, and appropriate for the learner's communication needs. To her, the learner must gain functional intelligibility (the ability to communicate effectively), functional communicability (the ability to meet one's communication needs), enhanced self-confidence, and speech monitoring and modifying abilities. As a result, it is critical that students studying English for international communication can communicate intelligibly and comprehensibly - not necessarily like native speakers, but well enough to be understood (Morley, 1991). It is also critical that students learn to understand it when spoken by individuals with varying accents in natural settings. In this regard, and as Rajadurai (2001) points out, one of the most important tenets of including listening and speaking courses in any curriculum is to teach pronunciation as an integral part of oral communication. The argument is that omitting pronunciation from communication as well as other components of language use is detrimental to the conversation.

Problem Statement

Since there is such a strong focus these days on the necessity of meaningful communication and comprehensible speech, it is no longer sufficient to confine pronunciation instruction and training solely to pronunciation courses, or even to listening and speaking workshops in certain programmes. When teachers are creative, they can almost always incorporate pronunciation into their lessons in order to reinforce concepts that have been taught previously in pronunciation classes, raise awareness of the importance of pronunciation as an integral part of teaching English as a second language, provide opportunities for practise, and offer encouragement and advice to learners as they work toward intelligibility for use outside of the classroom (Rajadurai, 2001; Rajadurai, 2002). The purpose of this study is to explore the prevalence of pronunciation errors among undergraduates at a Malaysian institution and to provide explanations for these errors by comparing the phonetic systems of English and Malay. Contrastive Analysis (CA) is a technique that is used to compare the structure of one's native

language with the structure of the target language, and it is extremely beneficial (Gao, 2005). CA believes that the similarities between the two languages will aid in learning, whilst the variances will enhance the difficulty of learning for the learners in both languages. As a result, the influence of the learners' native language on their target language can be both good and detrimental. Another sort of language study is error analysis (EA), which focuses on the errors made by learners (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). EA is an effective technique for assisting teachers in predicting and comprehending their students' pronunciation challenges. According to Corder (1967), thoroughly analysing language learners' errors enables teachers to identify areas that require reinforcement. As a result, the application of EA can aid in the effective learning and teaching of a new language. Furthermore, it is critical for learners to become aware of the disparities between their native language and second language during the learning process.

Research Question(s)
The study is conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the mispronunciations in English among the undergraduates in oral communication course?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the mispronunciations?

Literature Review
Various researchers have attempted to categorise mispronunciations. Bonaventura, Herron, and Menzel (2000) define three categories of mispronunciation: issues with non-native sounds, carry-over of mother tongue (L1) regularities, and overgeneralizations of target language (L2) regularities. Speakers will substitute the closest-sounding phoneme from their native language for non-existent phonemes in L1. An example of a common German English mispronunciation is the substitution of the [w] for the [v]; therefore, with becomes vith. The second sort of mispronunciation involves phonological alterations, such as devoicing final voiced stop consonants or mapping mother tongue spelling to sound. Germans mispronounce banned by converting the [d] to a [t], whereas Italians mispronounce sang as two independent phones [n] and [g] to match their mother tongue's orthography. The third sort of mispronunciation is when a speaker uses an incorrect word. Consider the mispronunciation of the vowel in judge. Not included in the study by Bonaventura et al. When adjacent phones impact one other, initial and final consonants or vowels are deleted or assimilated. The place of the mispronunciation also effects detection. The listener took longer to notice a mispronunciation in the initial syllable of the term. Donselaar (1996) finds that initial word deviations are less frequent than middle or end word variances. The emphasised variances are simpler to detect by listeners. Thus, non-native speakers will have to work more than native speakers to communicate effectively with native speakers if they want to avoid mispronouncing words.

The question of whether the other languages have a negative impact on the speakers' spoken English performance in terms of understandability and reputation on the international stage is one of the most pressing concerns today. Having said same, it is critical for non-native speakers to understand the phonological system of the second language to be fluent in it. The sounds and intonation of the language are included in this category (Van Weeren & Theunissen, 1987). Because it is a significant element in the incidence of mispronunciations, the effect of some of

the locals' first languages on their English oral proficiency, such as Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) is explored in this study. The prevalence of mispronunciations among L2 learners is correlated with the phonetic variances between the learners' first and second languages. According to Flege (1993), when there are noises that do not exist in one's L1, they are substituted with sounds that are comparable to those that do exist in one's L1 while one is utilising the L2. Many ideas have been proposed to explain the influence of L1 on the learners of L2 in various contexts. These theories include the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg, 1967), the theory of language transfer (interference of L1) (Gass & Selinker, 1972), the Contrastive Analytic Hypothesis (CA) (Lado, 1957), and the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) (all of which are mentioned by Fu (2010)). (Eckman, 1977).

Penfield and Roberts (1959) first proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis, which states that it becomes more difficult for speakers to develop native-like fluency in a second language when they reach puberty. Silverberg and Samuel (2004) conducted a test of the CPH and concluded that the most evident conclusion is that the rate of second language learning does fall consistently with time, although age is not the sole factor contributing to this reduction. The Theory of Language Transfer offers an alternative perspective, arguing that there can be two sorts of transfers because of L2 learners applying their L1 knowledge in an L2 setting. This results in either a positive or negative transfer, which can occur between L1 and L2 or vice versa (Cook, 2003). The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is essentially identical to the Theory of Language Transfer, which states that the more similar the L1 and L2 sounds are, the easier it is for learners to accurately acquire the language (Lado, 1957). Finally, the Markedness Differential Hypothesis fills in the gaps left by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, namely, the development of sound substitutes that do not exist in both L1 and L2 but do exist in the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977). These theories provide evidence that there is a relationship between the phonological systems of L1 and L2, and that if non-native speakers of a language do not exert control over the influences of their L1 on their acquisition and usage of L2, features of their L1 will remain prominent in their speech, and they will find it difficult to become fully proficient in the language in which they speak (Flege, 1993).

Methodology

Participants
The research adopts a qualitative approach. Qualitative research does not need a large sample of population; therefore 25 students from different races mainly Sabah Bumiputeras, Malays, and Chinese were chosen to participate in this research. All the participants have also completed their MUET test (Malaysian University English Test) and have obtained MUET Bands 1-3 which indicate that they are low proficient English language users.

Procedure
Recording work was done with the help of digital recorder. The themes for the impromptu presentations were chosen at random by the instructor to the participants. Before the recording session began, the participants were given the opportunity to prepare brief notes for their speeches. It was decided that participants would have three minutes to prepare and three minutes to present.

The recording was played back several times under the guidance of the phonemic transcription in the Oxford Advance English Dictionary, and the pronunciation errors were noted. A comparison was made between the linguistic features of English and Bahasa Malaysia that could explain the mispronunciations made by the students.

Contrastive analysis hypothesis (CA) (Lado, 1957) and Theory of Language Transfer (Gass & Selinker, 1972) were used to explain the occurrences of these mispronunciations. The phonetic and phonological differences that exist between the languages were taken into consideration to come up with an explanation for their occurrences.

Result and Discussion

Mispronunciations in Oral Communication Course
Several words were mispronounced by participants, as noted in Table 1. The words have been classified by the sound that has been substituted or removed. With the exception of the words that were mispronounced repeatedly by various students, there were a few exceptional occurrences of mispronunciation that happened less frequent. Due to the fact that the mispronunciations happened less frequently, it is plausible to conclude that the participant said those words erroneously accidently and was likely ignorant of the error, which may explain why the participant did not correct it.

Table 1: Examples of Mispronunciations

	Word	Correct pronunciation	Mispronunciation
Omission of Sounds	Film	/fɪlm/	/fɪləm/
	Restaurant	/ˈrɛstrɒnt/	/restərʌn/
	Pocket	/ˈpɒkɪt/	/pɒket/
	Ticket	/ˈtɪkɪt/	/tɪket/
	Student	/ˈstjuːdənt/	/studən/
	Sofa	/ˈsəʊfə/	/sɔfa/
	Cake	/keɪk/	/kæk/
	Orange	/ˈɒrɪndʒ/	/ɒrən/
	Point	/pɔɪnt/	/pɔɪn/
Replacement of /θ/	Three	/θriː/	/triː/
	Thorn	/ θɔːn/	/tɒn/
	Throw	/θrəʊ/	/trɒ/
	Think	/θɪŋk/	/tɪŋk/
	Tooth	/tuːθ/	/tut/
	Cloth	/klɒθ/	/klɒt/
Replacement of /ð/	The	/ðə/	/də/
	This	/ðɪs/	/dɪs/
	Those	/ðəʊz/	/dɒs/
	Then	/ðen/	/den/
	Their	/ðeə/	/de/

	That	/ðæt/	/det/
	Other	/ˈʌðə/	/ˈʌdə/

When speaking Malay as their primary language, it is common for speakers to substitute the /θ/ sound with the /t/ sound. Because there is no /θ/ in either of these languages, negative transfer occurs, and another sound from the speakers' native language is utilised to replace the /θ/, according to the Theory of Language Transfer. Because /θ/ is a voiceless sound like /t/, it is the closest sound to /θ/ in Malay. As a result, the word through is pronounced /tru/ rather than /θru/. Similarly, the voiced /ð/ is absent in the Malay language and is substituted by another voiced sound /d/. These substitutes for /θ/ and /ð/ reflect the findings of Major and Faudree (1996), who also found that Chinese speakers have trouble pronouncing the letters /θ/ and /ð/ in their own language. The unvoiced "th" in words such as "three" is frequently reduced to the letter "t" in Malaysia by new learners or ignorant speakers. We therefore hear "tree" for the number three, "trow" for "throw", and much more. The voiced "th" sound in words such as "the," "those," and "this" is frequently changed into the letter "d" in speech. This pair of TH sounds (/ð/ and /θ/) according to Yamaguchi (2014), is not present in the sound inventory of the Malay language.

Overlapping of sounds in both the Malay and English languages is rather prevalent, owing to the fact that the Malay language has borrowed many English words from the English language. Terms such as "film," "restaurant," "pocket," "ticket," "sofa," "cake," "orange," and "point" are all translated into Malay as "filem," "restoran," "poket," "tiket," "sofa," "kek," "oren," and "poin," respectively. Because Malay speakers are accustomed to pronouncing these terms in their first language, they tend to omit the last consonant and mispronounce the English word in all of these Malay words. Words such as 'pocket' and 'ticket' include /e/ in the second syllable, indicating that /e/ has been substituted for /ɪ/. When the word 'pocket' was developed in Malay, it was called 'poket,' which means pocket in Malay. Similarly, the word 'ticket' /tɪkɪt/ became 'tiket' /tɪket/ in Malay. The Malay word 'sofa' [sɔfa] was derived from the English word 'sofa' [səʊfə]. They replaced /əʊ/ with /ɔ:/ in the first syllable while /ə/ with /a:/ in the second syllable. Some of the respondents mispronounced the word 'film' (/flm/) as 'filem' (/fɪləm /) in Malay, which is correct. The name of the fruit 'orange' / ɒrəndʒ / was pronounced as 'oren' / ɒrən / in Malay. According to the evidence, it's possible that the Malay pronunciation / ɒrən /, which has only one final singleton /n/, had an impact on how the / ndʒ / clusters were formed in English. The word 'cake' /keɪk/ was also mispronounced. It was pronounced as /kek/ like the Malay word. In Malay, the word 'cake' is formed with the diphthong / eɪ / being replaced with the consonant /e/.

Consequently, based on these findings, it is evident that a learner's first language has a significant impact on their second-language acquisition and production. In the learner's language knowledge, sound systems from both the L1 and L2 are unconsciously processed. When a certain sound does not exist or is only seldom heard in the L1, modifications are made.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to look at the mispronunciations that occur in English oral communication course among the lower proficiency undergraduates, as well as the factors that lead to these mispronunciations. The findings indicate that mispronunciations

are extremely widespread; yet the occurrences of mispronunciations are predictable since they support the Theory of Language Transfer, which makes it easier to explain the rationale for the mispronunciations.

The Critical Period Theory should serve as a guide for parents in exposing their children to additional languages besides their native tongue while they are still young for them to get an early grasp of the languages. Apart from the involvement of parents at home, ESL instructors could help weaker students with difficulties in oral communication by being more aware of their speaking difficulties and mispronunciations. Guidance and corrections in a non-intimidating way could be one of the ways to support tertiary level students, as even university students struggle with the same errors. To further develop this study, it is recommended that the right measurements and strategies to invite willingness to communicate could be undertaken by future researchers to help students with difficulties in oral proficiency.

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