

Understanding Pronunciation Variations Facing ESL Students

Liang-Chen Lin

Texas A&M University-Kingsville
MSC 196, 700 University Blvd, Kingsville, TX 78363-8202, U.S.A.

Abstract

Today's teachers encounter a big challenge, that of students from diverse backgrounds bringing language diversity to classrooms. Rather, teaching is no longer simple, but obligates teachers to meet the needs of diverse students in diverse classrooms where differentiated instruction is required. Specifically, variations in pronunciation cause diverse students' difficulties and problems in cross-cultural communication. It is imperative that teachers know about those students' pronunciation variations beyond the border of the standardized English in order to help them move forward in English language learning. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore pronunciation variations facing English as a second language (ESL) students. With a focus on five groups of ESL students' major problems in English articulation, this article provides teachers with brief information pertaining to diverse population's pronunciation variations commonly seen as they strive to teach their ESL students how to articulate English words and refine the instruction.

Keywords: pronunciation variations, ESL students, English articulation, English as a second language

1. Introduction

Pronunciation is the most important skill of spoken English (as cited in Gilakjani, 2011). Not surprisingly, pronunciation instruction plays a significant role in the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) (Jahan, 2011). Given that the majority of ESL learners seek to speak native-like English (Derwing, 2003), the importance of teaching pronunciation cannot be emphasized too much (Hismanoglu, 2006). Obviously, it is imperative that teachers help learners of English develop the ability for the communication needs and the ability for being understood easily (Morley, 1991).

However, many of English language learners (ELLs) confront difficulties in learning English pronunciation (Gilakjani, 2011). Problems in pronunciation weaken their communicative competence (Hinofotis, 1981). More severely, many of them still lack sufficient proficiency in pronunciation even if they have learned English in an ESL course. In fact, it is understandable that an ESL student using a nonstandard variety of English might be negatively affected while acquiring English language if they are not familiar with standardized English (Charity & Mallinson, 2011). Specifically, ESL students' "pronunciation conventions differ from those of English speakers" (Benjamin, 2002). Accordingly, helping ESL students learn standardized English should begin with understanding pronunciation variations that ESL students possess while acquiring English.

Needless to say, to enhance ESL students' ability in English articulation, teachers should develop the awareness towards pronunciation variations while working with them (Morley, 1991). More precisely, it is necessary that teachers develop their awareness on diverse sound structures, further gaining insights into pronunciation variations that ESL students are facing now. In particular, teachers who work with students from diverse backgrounds need to have informative knowledge on ESL students' English language variation in order to better serve those students. Unfolding the differences and problems of English articulation, the purpose of this article is therefore to provide educators with a brief understanding of ESL students' pronunciation variations commonly seen in diverse classrooms through the exploration of the following question of inquiry: What are some common pronunciation variations facing ESL students?

2. A Brief Theoretical Overview

Good pronunciation brings success to ESL students in American society. On the contrary, insufficient proficiency of English pronunciation influences the development of communicative competence that is required for building up the communicative bridge between speakers and listeners.

Precisely speaking, great pronunciation competence in English is able to make others understand easily; whereas, English pronunciation inferior to basic level increases the misunderstanding among conversations with others (Gilakjani, 2011; Jahan, 2011). It is not necessary to speak English like a native speaker but “well enough to be understood” (Jesry, 2005). Clearly, the positive effect of good pronunciation in the process of learning English is assured and reinforced; thus, ESL students should be taught standardized ways of English articulation (Gilakjani, 2011).

Talking of the standardized English articulation, the fact that students’ language variations affect how they perform in academic years of schools should not be neglected (Charity, & Mallinson, 2011). In particular, phonological variation is one of language variables involving learning processes (Sinha, Banerjee, Sinha, & Shastri, 2009). Rather, sound patterns of learners’ first language are likely to influence their pronunciation in target languages (Jahan, 2011; as cited in Jesry, 2005; Zhang, 2009). Chinese students, for example, would pronounce the word “think” as “sink” seeing that the voiceless sound “θ” does not exist in Chinese (Gao, 2005). Understandably, nonstandardized English-speaking students are therefore afraid of being teased or feel embarrassed when they try to pronounce English accurately (Nogita, 2010).

It is obvious that differences in phonological system of mother languages will hinder rather than promote English pronunciation learning (Huang & Radant, 2009). To improve ESL students’ English pronunciation, teachers thus must gain insights into their pronunciation variations, which will provide teachers with ideas of designing differentiated teaching strategies for dealing with those students’ problems in learning English pronunciation. In fact, teachers are able to help all students learn standardized English without diminishing their linguistic backgrounds through knowing their language variations (Charity & Mallinson, 2011). Accordingly, verbal assessment should not be based on specific norms, but take linguistic differences into account and value students’ voices.

Needless to say, knowing English language variation of ESL students will eventually help teachers prepare to instruct their students, perceive the learning problems, and help students solve the problems (Dalle & Young, 2003). Hazen stated that “if people had a better understanding of how language works, they would probably be less inclined to make negative judgments about speakers of different dialects” (Hazen, 2001, p. 1). Indeed, “language is integral to both culture and identity, an understanding of language variation and language diversity is critical to multicultural education” (Charity & Mallinson, 2011). “We can’t teach what we don’t know” (as cited in Charity & Mallinson, 2011). Therefore, understanding pronunciation variations facing ESL students can help teachers be aware of students’ dialect diversity and challenges in learning standardized English articulation.

With a central idea on the interference of first language, the above discussions present the importance of being able to speak English with good articulation as well as the difficulties and problems ESL students face while acquiring English pronunciation. Undoubtedly, the brief theoretical overview discussed above is imperative in order for readers to understand the answer of the inquiry question addressed in this article. The next section will discuss the answer of the inquiry question through reviewing relevant literature with regard to major pronunciation variations facing ESL students today.

3. Discussion

As addressed in the introduction section, the inquiry question guiding this article was: what are some common pronunciation variations facing ESL students? Targeting five groups of ESL students, the following discussion briefly indicates students’ major sounds of misarticulation and phonological factors causing their English pronunciation problems. To understand ESL students’ problems and difficulties in English articulation, the exploration of nonstandardized English phonetic sounds will help educators build awareness of pronunciation variations facing the targeted ESL students: Vietnamese, Japanese, Arabian, Spaniard and Chinese.

3.1 Vietnamese Speakers of English

The common problem of Vietnamese speakers when they speak English is mainly the pronunciation of “final consonants” (Nguyen, 2007). For examples, native speakers of Vietnamese acquiring English as a second language may pronounce the word “coat” to be “code” as in the sentence “Did you forget your coat?” Taking final consonants into consideration, /T/ and /D/ at syllable-final are commonly confused with /t/ and /d/ for Vietnamese speakers of English (Nguyen, 2007). It is easily seen from this problem that English has a number of consonants, particularly final consonants which “do not exist in Vietnamese rather than vice versa” (Nguyen, 2007).

Accordingly, properly pronouncing English consonants is one of the most difficult things that Vietnamese-speaking people have to face from the very beginning.

3.2 Japanese Speakers of English

Japanese speakers learning English also confront difficulties in English articulation. Rather, phonological variations facing them are related to their basic syllable structure (Ohata, 2004). In Japanese, the syllables generally take a CV structure (Ohata, 2004). All of the words end with vowels. Thus, when Japanese begin to learn English, they tend to add some vowels after English words which end with consonants (Ohata, 2004). Take the words *baby* [bebi], *bath* [basu] and *gum* [gamu] for examples. The vowel sound /i/ is attached to the final syllable in the word “baby” [bebi]. The vowel sound /u/ is attached to the final syllable in the word “bath” [basu]. Likewise, the word “gum” is pronounced [gamu] with the vowel /u/ after the consonant /m/. Apparently, phonological interference from first language affects learners’ pronunciation as they acquire English as a second/foreign language (Parker & Riley, 2009).

3.3 Arabic Speakers of English

Common pronunciation variations facing Arabic speakers learning English are due to a language transfer from their native language. “English permits syllable-initial clusters of up to three consonants,” such as “*street*” /strit/ (Parker & Riley, 2009). However, in Arabic, a vowel sound will be inserted when the stems have onset consonant clusters for the purpose of making the articulation conform to Arabic syllable structure (Parker & Riley, 2009). Arabic students learning English, for example, will insert the vowel /i/ in the following forms: *floor* [iflor], *snow* [isno], *plane* [iblen] and *fred* [ifred]. Arabic language allows more simple syllables than complex ones. This is why the vowel /i/ is inserted stem-initially. Pronunciation variations discussed here prove that language interference from first language gives rise to Arabic-speaking ESL learners’ learning outcomes in English (Alshayban, 2012).

3.4 Spanish Speakers of English

For Spanish speakers of English, the common pronunciation problems mainly fall on long vowel /ā/ and voiced consonant /d/. Spanish students have difficulties recognizing the differences between short vowel and long vowel A (Case, 2012). For instance, long vowel /ā/ is pronounced as short vowel /a/ in the word “*say*.” In addition, the differences between the voiced consonant /d/ and voiceless consonant /th/ also confuse Spanish-speaking students. For example, voiced consonant /d/ is pronounced as voiceless consonant /th/ in the word “*dare*.” Many of Spanish-speaking students are not aware that the voiced consonant /d/ and voiceless consonant /th/ have different ways of articulation, especially in an initial position. Additionally, in Spanish, both letters “v” and “b” are pronounced as the sound /b/, such as the word “*vaca*” is likely to be pronounced as “*bacá*” (Frederick, 2005). Clearly, Spanish-speaking students’ misarticulation of English words is due to first language interference.

3.5 Chinese Speakers of English

Chinese sound systems affect the pronunciation of a target language, further influencing Chinese-speaking students’ foreign accents (Zhang, 2009). As a result of lacking both sounds /θ/ and /ð/ in Chinese, the sounds /s/ and /z/ are substituted for the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ (Zhang, 2009; Gao, 2005). The word “*teeth*,” for example, sounds like “*tees*,” and the word “*though*” sounds like “*so*.” Also, English sounds /r/ and /ʃ/ differ from Chinese sounds /r/ and /sh/ (Zhang, 2009; Kho, 2011). The words “*English*” and “*rice*,” for example, will be misarticulated. Still, Chinese students have problems in pronouncing the sound /v/; thus, the word “*advantage*” will be pronounced as “*adwantage*” and the word “*private*” will be pronounced as “*priwate*” (Gao, 2005). Overall, aforementioned pronunciation problems of Chinese speakers of English mirror the interference of first language.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Uncovering the differences and problems of English articulation, this article was to provide educators with a brief understanding of pronunciation variations that ESL students are facing. To achieve the above scholastic objective, this article presented a brief theoretical overview for answering the inquiry question: What are some common pronunciation variations facing ESL students? Therefore, an overall review of five targeted ESL students’ major problems in English articulation assured the influence of first language in second language learning.

Based on the purpose and inquiry question of this article, five groups of ESL students' major pronunciation problems commonly seen were introduced in this article. First, the common problem of Vietnamese speakers of English is mainly the pronunciation of "final consonants." Second, Japanese speakers of English tend to add some vowels after English words which end with consonants according to their basic CV structure. Third, Arabic speakers learning English tend to insert a vowel sound when the stems have onset consonant clusters for the purpose of making the articulation conform to Arabic syllable structure. Fourth, the common pronunciation problems of Spanish-speaking learners of English mainly fall on long vowel /ā/, consonants /d, th, v/ and /b/. Fifth, Chinese-speaking students have problems in pronouncing /θ/, /ð/, /r/, /ʃ/ and /v/.

As expected, this article contributes to teachers working with English language learners in the areas of pronunciation variations. Teachers may adopt specific pedagogical strategies for helping students achieve their highest potential through a well-considerate instructional design that integrates information regarding pronunciation variations facing ESL students. To begin with an understanding of ESL students' pronunciation variations, teachers are capable of dealing with students' difficulties and problems in learning English articulation. Clearly, teachers' knowledge about pronunciation variations of diverse population has a great impact on ESL students' pronunciation improvement no matter inside or outside the classroom.

Considering the positive effects of understanding ESL students' pronunciation variations, the author recommends teachers to take an in-depth look at differences of sound patterns between standardized English and languages other than English for helping students enhance English pronunciation, further promoting their English instruction. Additionally, the author encourages schools to provide teachers with professional workshops in which teachers are likely to learn how to distinguish between different pronunciation patterns and how to improve ESL students' pronunciation on the target English sounds. As a whole, the exploration of diverse pronunciation variations is expected to move ESL instruction forward to an advanced stage where language diversity is respected and students' language challenges are solved eventually.

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