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THE ROLE OF TEACHING VOWEL SOUNDS IN PRONUNCIATION DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Teaching of vowel sounds plays a critical role in the development of pronunciation skills in language learners. This article explores the significance of vowel sounds in speech clarity and overall communication effectiveness. Drawing upon recent linguistic research, phonetic studies, and pedagogical approaches, how targeted vowel instruction can improve learners' pronunciation, reduce foreign accents, and facilitate effective communication in a second language will be examined.

Keywords: *pronunciation, language learning, phonetics, English language, vowel sound acquisition.*

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a fundamental skill for those who want to use English effectively in communication. As highlighted by Hismanoglu (2006), learners need to understand that pronunciation is crucial for successful oral communication between speakers and listeners. Pronunciation involves the way words are spoken, including the articulation of sounds, a generally accepted or understood way of speaking, and the representation of these sounds using phonetic symbols. One common challenge is understanding phonetics, as learners often bring phonetic influences from their native languages, such as Javanese, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, and others (Hughes et al., 2002). To

address this issue, teachers need to motivate students to improve their English pronunciation. The goal of pronunciation teaching is not necessarily to achieve native-like pronunciation but to help students meet the basic standards of good pronunciation. Pronunciation involves the phonetic description of sound-symbol relationships, represented alphabetically. This includes two key aspects: consonants and vowels, which differ in their sounds and symbols. In the author's view, pronouncing English vowels is often more challenging than pronouncing consonants. Many students struggle with correct vowel pronunciation. For example, instead of correctly pronouncing the word "that" as /θæt/, students often say /θɛt/ or /θʌt/. British English pronunciation is used as the phonetic standard in this context.

METHODS

While conducting this research, qualitative and secondary data analysis methods were used to demonstrate impacts of teaching vowel sounds on improvement of students' pronunciation. Various previous scientific works were analyzed, and according to Celce-Murcia (2006), pronunciation is the aspect of language that most easily distinguishes speakers as non-native. It involves attention to specific sounds of a language (segments), and also to broader aspects of speech, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), voice quality, and even gestures and expressions associated with speech. Kelly (2001) presents the idea that pronunciation consists of two primary elements: phonemes and suprasegmental features. Research shows that games can significantly improve students' pronunciation, as noted by Kiswindari (2018). Hakim (2012) explored the pronunciation of phonetic sounds such as /b/, /d/, /g/, /j/, /dʒ/, and /ð/ in English by Javanese students, examining how strongly their native phonetic patterns influence their English pronunciation, whether it affects the meaning of sentences or just alters stress and sound. Hago and Khan (2015) investigated the difficulties faced by Saudi secondary school learners in pronouncing English consonants, particularly focusing on English consonant clusters. They used various methods to collect data, including questionnaires, classroom observations, and document collection. A descriptive and

statistical approach was employed to describe, classify, analyze, and explain the data, leading to relevant recommendations. The study found that participants struggled with eleven consonant sounds, specifically /p/, /ʒ/, /ŋ/, /r/, /t/, /ʃ/, /t/, /t/, /v/, /k/, /l/, and /d/. Pronouncing English words correctly based on their spelling can be challenging because English spelling often does not directly represent pronunciation. While there is some consistency between sounds and written symbols, English spelling frequently shows little clear relationship to the sounds of the words. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the sounds spoken and the letters in the written word. For instance, the spelling of “o” in “door” and “fool” results in different pronunciations: in “door”, “o” is pronounced as /ɔ:/. Additionally, the same sound may have different spellings, as seen with the /ɔ:/ sound in “port”, “stalk”, and “caught”, where it is represented by “o”, “a”, and “au”, respectively. These words are pronounced as /pɔ:t/, /stɔ:k/, and /kɔ:t/. According to C. Paris (2020), vowels consist of two types: long vowels and short vowels. Long vowels are vowel sounds that “say their name”, and we hold these sounds longer than short vowel sounds. However, they are distinct sounds rather than longer versions of the same sound. Short vowel sounds do not follow the same naming rule and are simply the other sounds that the vowel letters can make. For example, /a/ is a short vowel sound, while /ā/ is the corresponding long vowel sound. This pattern applies to other vowels: /A/ and /ā/ are pronounced /eɪ/ as in “ate” or “mate”; /E/ and /ē/ are pronounced /i:/ as in “eat” or “meat”; /I/ and /ī/ are pronounced /aɪ/ as in “mite” or “might”; /o/ and /ō/ are pronounced /oʊ/ as in “oats” or “mote”; and /U/ and /ū/ are pronounced /ju:/ as in “mute”.

For short vowels, consider:

- A: Short: /æ/ as in “fat”; Long: /eɪ/ as in “fate”.
- E: Short: /ɛ/ as in “wet”; Long: /i:/ as in “wheat”.
- I: Short: /ɪ/ as in “win”; Long: /aɪ/ as in “wine”.
- O: Short: /ɒ/ as in “bot”; Long: /oʊ/ as in “boat”.
- U: Short: /ʌ/ as in “cup”; Long: /ju:/ as in “cube”.

Generally, when syllables conclude with a vowel followed by a consonant, the vowel sound is pronounced short.

RESULTS

The Importance of Vowel Sounds in Pronunciation

Vowel sounds contribute significantly to the rhythm, stress, and melody of speech. In many languages, such as English, vowel length and quality can distinguish word meaning (e.g., “bit” vs. “beat”). For language learners, mastering the vowel system of a target language is essential for achieving clear and comprehensible pronunciation.

Research suggests that learners often struggle more with vowel sounds than consonants because vowel production involves fine-tuned articulatory and acoustic properties. Factors such as tongue height, tongue position, lip rounding, and lengthening or shortening of the vowel create subtle differences in sounds that are crucial for native-like pronunciation. Therefore, explicit instruction in vowel sounds can greatly impact learners’ ability to be understood and to perceive the sounds of the target language correctly.

Cognitive Aspects of Vowel Sound Acquisition

The acquisition of vowel sounds involves both perceptual learning and motor learning. Perceptual learning focuses on the ability to distinguish between different vowel sounds and involves auditory processing skills. For instance, research has shown that exposure to various vowel sounds can enhance the learner’s ability to discern subtle differences between similar vowels. Motor learning, on the other hand, involves the coordination of the tongue, lips, jaw, and breath to produce the correct sound. Neuroscientific studies indicate that the brain’s auditory and motor regions are engaged when learning to pronounce new vowel sounds. The left superior temporal gyrus, in particular, is known to be activated during vowel perception and production tasks. Effective pronunciation teaching methods leverage this cognitive understanding by incorporating multisensory learning activities, including visual aids (e.g., mouth diagrams), auditory feedback, and kinesthetic practices.

DISCUSSION

Challenges in Teaching Vowel Sounds

One of the primary challenges in teaching vowel sounds is the lack of one-to-one correspondence between vowels in a learner's native language and those in the target language. For example, English has a larger vowel inventory than many other languages, creating difficulty for learners whose native languages have fewer vowel sounds. Additionally, learners often have difficulty identifying and producing vowel sounds that do not exist in their first language or that have different articulatory features.

Interference from the learner's first language (L1) can lead to a range of pronunciation errors, such as vowel substitutions, where a learner replaces an unfamiliar vowel sound with a more familiar one from their native language. Furthermore, fossilization of incorrect vowel sounds may occur if the learner is not provided with targeted instruction and feedback.

Effective Strategies for Teaching Vowel Sounds:

- ✚ ***Phonetic Training.*** Using phonetic symbols and minimal pairs can help learners differentiate between similar vowel sounds. Phonetic training focuses on helping learners identify and produce the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols corresponding to the vowel sounds of the target language.
- ✚ ***Auditory Discrimination Exercises.*** These exercises help learners distinguish between different vowel sounds through listening activities. For instance, learners may listen to pairs of words that differ solely in their vowel sounds (such as "ship" and "sheep") and determine which word they hear.
- ✚ ***Articulatory Instruction.*** Visual aids, such as diagrams of the mouth and tongue, can be used to show the correct positioning for each vowel sound. Teachers can demonstrate and instruct on the height and backness of the tongue, as well as lip rounding and tension.
- ✚ ***Technology-Assisted Learning.*** Speech recognition software and language learning apps offer real-time feedback on vowel production. These tools can

provide learners with immediate corrective feedback, allowing for rapid adjustment and practice.

✚ **Contrastive Analysis.** Comparing the vowel system of the learner's first language with that of the target language can help identify specific areas of difficulty. Teachers can then focus on those sounds that pose the greatest challenge.

✚ **Contextualized Practice.** Integrating vowel sounds into meaningful communication practice, such as role plays, storytelling, or conversation exercises, can help reinforce their correct usage in natural speech contexts.

✚ **Implications for Language Acquisition**

Teaching vowel sounds effectively can significantly enhance learners' pronunciation skills, reducing their foreign accent and improving their overall intelligibility. A focus on vowel sounds also supports other aspects of language learning, such as listening comprehension and fluency, by sharpening the learner's phonological awareness and ability to process spoken language in real time. Research has shown that early intervention in vowel sound teaching can prevent the fossilization of incorrect pronunciation patterns, making it a critical component of language education. Furthermore, the incorporation of multimodal learning techniques and adaptive technologies can cater to diverse learner needs, promoting inclusivity and engagement.

CONCLUSION

Vowel sounds are a crucial aspect of pronunciation that directly affect language learners' communicative competence. By understanding the cognitive processes underlying vowel sound acquisition and employing targeted teaching strategies, teachers can help learners achieve more accurate pronunciation. As research continues to study more about pronunciation pedagogy, there is an opportunity to develop more effective methods for teaching vowel sounds, ultimately contributing to better language learning outcomes.

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