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PROBLEMS WITH PRONUNCIATION AMONG STUDENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE-SEEU

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ABSTRACT

Everybody who has learned English as a second or foreign language knows that for reaching intermediate levels, English is an easy language regarding grammar and vocabulary; however, when reaching advanced levels, the learners are faced with complex forms of morphology, syntax, and most obviously, they are faced with the difficulties that pronunciation presents. These are mainly the problems that occur with the English students whose native language is other than English. An experienced teacher of non-native speakers of English can easily recognize the causes of mispronunciation, which in most cases are lack of vocabulary, lack of practice, bad teaching experiences, lack of direct contact with the language, and lack of self-confidence. There are quite a lot of words in English, which are often mispronounced. Those who have just started to learn English as a foreign language, students at primary schools, adults using English as a means of communication and as a working tool, such as businessmen, politicians, administrators, doctors, accountants, and those studying English for teaching purposes, even the teachers of English are faced with the problems of proper pronunciation of words in English.

The aim of this research is to identify the problems that the students in the Department of English Language and Literature in the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication face with when they deal with pronunciation of lexical words.

Key words: grammar, pronunciation, students, language.

INTRODUCTION

When people in general start to learn a language, they try to learn as many words as possible. Thus, first they are able to learn an unknown word, then form a phrase, hopefully a sentence, and later, they try to engage themselves in communication with those whose native language is other than English, but whose interest to speak English is held in common, either due to the specificities at the workplace, at the schools they teach and in turn, even with others whose English language is a mother tongue, or whose English is used as lingua franca i.e. they are native English speakers or, as “Kachru explains, the inner circle, or the outer circle speakers of English, and even the ones from the expanding one” (as cited in Sergean and Swan, 2012, p. 31), in which circle Kosovo and North Macedonia currently belong – but which, in our opinion, at least in the former case, has the tendency to move to the outer one. Taking into account the elements that one considers in learning a language, and why one may later on mispronounce words is not as important as is, a situation where in spite of knowing that they are wrongly pronounced, a speaker takes no steps whatsoever in correcting them.

Whether we pronounce words correctly or not is not a matter of our choice that we may decide on, it is rather a must for everyone to pronounce them correctly, and this is so because words need to be well-used by being well-articulated and well understood when uttered. The purpose behind good pronunciation is not primarily to sound like native English speakers but it is primarily needed to be properly understood by others. Burns and Claire (2003) argue that good pronunciation is also needed because of:

- Intelligibility (the speaker produces sound patterns that are recognizable as English),
- Comprehensibility (the listener is able to understand the meaning of what is said),
- Interpretability (the listener is able to understand the purpose of what is said), (p. 5).

However, the following points are made by two different studies of the stances of two groups:

Research on learners’ perceived needs, suggests that learners believe pronunciation is important (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). On the other hand, surveys and interviews with teachers have revealed that teachers often see pronunciation as being less important (Morley, 1994; Naimen, 1992), (as cited in Brawn 2010, p. 113).

As we take these two opposite stances into account, we may come to a conclusion that, to a certain degree while the former are pro pronunciation, the latter are not in favor of it, which may be an indication that errors may have been occurring due to teachers not considering pronunciation important and hence the utterance of certain words has been taking place. Just because of what is said above, one should take pronunciation seriously into account, and doing so, will thus help students make fewer mistakes. In addition, pronunciation plays a key role and is an important element which is a prerequisite for all the speakers of English because failing to utilize good pronunciation may give rise to awkward or unintelligible utterances in English in spite of many being in possession of an extensive and rich vocabulary.

Teachers' role in teaching pronunciation is of crucial importance. Brawn (2010) has highlighted that English teachers are also teachers of pronunciation. In order to speak a language, we have to learn a language and pronunciation, and if teachers ignore it, they are sending their students a message. The message may be the following; i) their pronunciation is either all right or ii) that they should not bother about pronunciation. As pointed out, one of the two issues has been conveyed by the message, with which we strongly agree, that pronunciation matters and is an effective tool through which a teacher can pass the required knowledge to his/her students and through which he/she can accordingly be understood better, more easily, and be more accurate in conveying meaning.

Having in mind that most of the students in the English department have learned English from teachers with whom they have shared the same mother tongue, it is obvious that the native language will be present in their pronunciation, especially with the real-friend words, the ones that generate from the same source language. In view of this, teachers should choose another approach, and that approach should be to sound like all those people who as non-native speakers have accepted the standard pronunciation of English. Therefore, the standard pronunciation of English according to Gómez, (2012) is the "Received Pronunciation (RP) also called Oxford English or BBC English, (p. 2). Therefore, by taking into account the pronunciation of two above-mentioned standards, language will be understood more easily by all those people speaking English.

Research questions:

- Q1: Do students at the Department of English Language and Literature, SEEU, make mistakes in pronunciations?
- Q2: Are some words mispronounced because of the lack of sounds in the students' native language?
- Q3: Does the mispronunciation come about as a result of habits that have been created in elementary and high schools?

Hypothesis:

- H1: Although some students of the English language and Literature Department have problems with pronunciation, there are no serious attempts to make improvements.
- H2: Mispronunciation rarely comes about as a result of the lack of sounds in the students' native language.
- H3: Major problems with mispronunciation come about as a result of habits that have been created in elementary and high schools.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pronunciation plays a key role and is an important element in English language teaching, indeed a prerequisite for professionals and those, in various professions including teachers in order to be well understood. Failure to adopt good pronunciation may give rise to awkward or unintelligible utterances in English in spite of many being in possession of an extensive and rich vocabulary. However, according to Cook's view:

Pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds. The habit of producing a sound is acquired by repeating it over and over again and by being corrected when it is pronounced wrongly. Learning to pronounce a second language means building up new pronunciation habits and overcoming the bias of the first language (as cited in Gilakjani, 2012, p. 96).

On the other hand, as Brawn (2010) has highlighted in his paper; English teachers are also teachers of pronunciation. In order to speak a language, we have to learn a language and pronunciation, and if teachers ignore it, they are sending their students a message. The message may be the following; their pronunciation is either all right or that they should not bother about pronunciation. Furthermore, according to Gilbert (2008):

A teacher can help overcome the psychological barrier and other challenges by thinking of the goal of pronunciation instruction not as helping students to sound like native speakers but as helping them to learn the core elements of spoken English so that they can be easily understood by others (p. 1).

According to Willis (2003) while describing one of his French friends whose English was remarkable, he founds that, it would take only a word or two spoken to her friend to understand what her nationality was, of which she was very proud. What the author highlights is that even though his friend wanted to be identified with where she came from as she used the accent from her mother tongue, yet her English was fluent and without any mistakes in pronunciation. In addition, speaking of pronunciation, Ur (1996) observes that "many people – even if often subconsciously – feel they wish to maintain a slight mother tongue accent as an assertion of personal or ethnic identity" (p. 52). This is obvious and no matter how hard we may try to

sound like native English language speakers, this is not always possible, and as Ur (1996) goes on to say, “this is not even desirable” (p. 52).

The element which leads to mispronunciations and which is tightly bound up with pronunciation is the stress. According to Nuhiu (2002), “stress refers to the degree of prominence that a syllable has” (p. 130). If we take the word ‘*development*’, which has several syllables, namely four, and look at it from the teachers’ point of view, when there is no stress used in it, or when the wrong stress is used, this word and others subsequently used without any or with a wrong stress, will only make words less comprehensible or in the best case scenario unpleasant to hear. Similarly, with the word ‘*present*’ which depending on the stress used, be that on the first or second syllable, could either be a noun or a verb, and if this word is not used in a larger context, it would be difficult for others to distinguish whether it is used as a noun or a verb.

Furthermore, Jenkins view of pronunciation is of paramount importance. He notes that “communication can break down not only due to pronunciation errors, which is certainly the first cause, but more seriously, these problems are very common and very hard to overcome” (as cited in McCrocklin, 2012, p. 249).

THE RESEARCH

This research is in particular dealing with pronunciation and the way words are pronounced by non-native speakers of English. It aims to identify the problems and reasons for mispronunciations, and whether something in particular is affecting these problems or not, what could potentially lie behind them.

Participants were 52 students of the 2nd and 3rd year of studies at the English and Literature Department in the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, SEEU.

The research was carried out during the formal classes, in particular during the speaking activities in Linguistic classes, as well as in Albanian/Macedonian – English translation classes. However, non-formal communication between the students and the lecturer, as well as informal communication among the students was a good tool for this research.

The instrument for the research was the list with the most common words, which are usually mispronounced by the students. However, apart from the listed words, the research encountered other words that were mispronounced in mutual communication with the students. The list was used during the speaking activities in the class, as well as in the Albanian/Macedonian – English oral Translation classes. For the purpose of this research, the students were given

various texts with the vocabulary items from the list. The errors made by the students were marked with a tick, whereas on separate sheet of paper, categories of errors were identified.

As the errors in pronunciation may occur for different reasons, the research aimed to find out if the errors in pronunciation are related to stress and rhythm, intonation, vowels, consonants and/or combinations of vowels and consonants. The list of words is given below:

1	Analysis	Noun
2	Accept	Verb
3	catastrophe	Noun
4	development	Noun
5	Except	Preposition
6	Expect	Verb
7	Focus	Noun
8	Literature	Noun
9	live vs. leave	verb/verb
10	live vs. live	verb/adj.
11	Purpose	Noun
12	Adjective	Noun
13	vegetable	Noun
14	Foreign	Adjective
15	countable	Adjective

The analysis made herein attempted to uncover the words most often mispronounced by English language and Literature students, and find out the reason behind such mispronunciations. The research proved that the impact of such mispronunciation was primarily phonology-related and to a lesser degree a morphological-related one as well. It revealed that students, in the majority of cases, were not aware of the words they were mispronouncing. Sometimes, the mispronunciation encountered and experienced was neglected, however, in other cases students were often aware of their mistakes and, as a matter of fact, admitted them.

In the table below the list of words that were mispronounced during the class is presented together with their correct pronunciation and the way the words were mispronounced:

	Root word	Correct pronunciation	Mispronunciation
1	Analysis	ə' næləsis	ə' næləizis
2	Accept	ək' sept	ak' sept
3	Catastrophe	kə' tæstrəfi	kə' tastrofi
4	Development	dɪ' veləpmənt	dɪve' lopment
5	Except	ɪk' sept	ek' sept
6	Expect	ɪk' spekt	ek' spekt
7	Focus	' fəʊkəs	' fə.kjəs
8	Literature	' lɪtrətʃər	' lɪterature
9	live vs. Leave	lɪv vs. li:v	lɪv vs. lɪv
10	live vs. live	lɪv vs. laɪv	lɪv vs. lɪv
11	Purpose	' pɜ:rpəs	' pɜ:rpous
12	Adjective	' ædʒɪktɪv	æ'dʒɪktɪv
13	Vegetable	' vedʒɪtəbl	' vedʒɪteɪbəl
14	Foreign	' fɔ:rən	' fɔ:rrein
15	Countable	' kaʊntəbl	' kaʊntəɪbəl

The table below shows the list of words, which are frequently mispronounced in informal settings, such as free conversation, online conversation during the Covid 19 period, mutual conversations with friends or classmates. This list is much longer than the one presented in the research, however, only the most frequently mispronounced lexical words are analyzed. Regarding the words and kinds of mispronunciation, notes on a separate sheet of paper were taken.

	Root words	Correct pronunciation	Mispronunciation
1	Accurately	' æk.jʊ.rətli	ə' k.jʊ.' rətli
2	Ancient	' eɪn.fənt	' en.fənt
3	Angrily	' æŋ.gri.li	' æŋ.gərli
4	Because	bɪ' kɑ:z	bɪ' kɔ::z
5	Beginning	bɪ' gɪn.ɪŋ	' beɡɪnɪŋ
6	Comfortable	' kʌm. fə.tə.bəl	' kom.for.tabl
7	Competitively	kəm' peɪ.ə.tɪvli	' kompet.ɪ.tɪveli
8	Continuous	kən' tɪn.ju.əs	kon' tɪn.ju:z
9	Engine	' en.dʒɪn	en.' dʒɪn
10	Fortunately	' fɔ:r.tʃən.ət.li	' fɔ:' tʃən.ət.li
11	Frequency	' fri:.kwən.si	' frekuen.si

12	Hotel	hou'tel	hΛ'tel
13	Neither	'nai.ðər, 'ni:ðə	'nei. ðə
14	Opinion	ə'pɪn.jən	'opɪnjən
15	Prediction	pri'dɪk.jən	'predɪk.jən
16	Pronunciation	prə'nʌn.si'ei.jən	'pro'nʌn.sɪeɪ.jən
17	Regularly	reg.jʊ.lərli	'regʊrləli
18	Satisfied	'sæt.ɪs.faid	sa'tɪsfaid
19	Uncommon	ʌn'kɑ:.mən	'ən'ko.mən
20	Vocabulary	/vʊʊ'kæb.jə.ləri	vokæb.jʊ.'lar:i
21	Women	'wɪmɪn	'wɒmɪn

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Mispronunciation of words among students of English Language and Literature Department had mostly to do with phonology and with the wrong use of stress in the syllables. There were cases when the words were mispronounced, i.e. when correct stress retained, but different sounds mispronounced. Most certainly, there is one category of students, which is not aware of the correct pronunciation of words, whereas the other category of students does not pay attention to these crucial particulars of English phonology.

PHONOLOGICAL ERRORS

Mistakes students made in respect of phonology may therefore be classified in three major groups, and are as follows: wrong stress, mispronunciation of words and, wrong stress and wrong pronunciation.

Issues with the wrong stress of words

A great many words used by students are used in such a way that students are certain enough, and think that they have correctly pronounced them. However, we as teachers, or other competent users of English, and especially “people from the inner and the outer cycle speakers of English”, as elaborated by Kachru (as cited in Sergeant and Swan, 2012, p. 31), will immediately spot the mispronounced word. In order to be correct with this term, what follows is an account of what is the phonological issue in this context?

Therefore, for instance the word *adjective*, when pronounced, entails a shift of stress made in the beginning of the word uttered /'ædʒektɪv/, but rather on the second syllable, /ə'dʒektɪv/. Secondly, the word *beginning*, instead of the stress being used in the second syllable /br'gɪn.ɪŋ/,

here students used it on the first one /'bɛɡɪnɪŋ/, thus giving more focus and more attention to the first syllable, and making it an inappropriate use from the English language point of view. Next, the words *beginning* and *develop* were also mispronounced, but in this case the stress was put on the second syllable, instead of being on the second. There were cases when these words were used with no stress at all.

Issues with wrong pronunciation of words

Unlike the issue with stress, this one deals mainly with the pronunciation of words, that is, stress is in the correct place, but certain words are used with a wrong pronunciation. For instance, the word *women*, instead of being pronounced /'wɪmɪn/, it seems that teachers are still retaining some use of the word *woman* from its singular use, and they combine it with the word *women* from the plural use, and thus it is pronounced /'wɒmɪn/, which is a kind of a combination of both. In some other cases, some other words are pronounced differently, for example the word *regularly* /'reg.jʊ.ləli/, is pronounced /'regʊləli/, or the word *hotel* /həʊ'tel/, is pronounced /hʌ'tel/. For further illustration, one can consider the examples of the word *because* in which we could identify an unpleasant sound uttered and incorrect pronunciation with a rather longer /o:/ compared to a short /o/ which made this word, and sound, unpleasant to hear. The same applies to *continuous*, again a long sound was present, indeed a long /u:/, and, in addition the /z/ sound, rather than /s/ was uttered at the end of this word, which only aggravated the errors and the sound uttered was a duplication of aural discordance.

Issues with wrong stress and wrong pronunciation

This part takes into account the combination of the first and second, namely wrong stress and wrong pronunciation. Words which have been detected and which we thought should belong to this category are described below using two germane examples. The word *develop* /dɪ'vel.əp/, is pronounced /develəp/, there is no single stress used with this word and the wrong pronunciation is also present in it. The word *dictionary* /'dɪk.ʃən.ər.i/, is pronounced /dɪk.'ʃənəri/, which means that the wrong stress is present in the second syllable instead of it being used in the first one, and wrong pronunciation follows to a certain degree.

In addition, and unlike the first one, the word *vocabulary* and others of the same nature encompassed, at the same time both the wrong stress and wrong pronunciation, namely, the former has a misplaced or shifted stress, and the latter used a long (r:) in it, therefore, as a result of mispronunciation it would have a distorting aural effect.

MORPHOLOGICAL ISSUE OF THE MISPRONOUNCED WORDS

Unlike the phonological issue, the morphological one is rather limited, is quite confined and hence not many words in this research paper belong to this category. Stress in the first place is not an issue here, nor can it be said that morphological problems caused wrong pronunciation; however, we have still grouped words from this category as the ones with wrong pronunciation, and the following considerations must be borne in mind. For instance, the word *homework* (/ˈhəʊm.wɜ:k/, which is pronounced /ˈhəʊm.wɜ:ks), especially when it comes to its use in plural, (probably an impact from the Albanian language in plural), may seem a perfect pronunciation to elementary English teachers. However, if we take into account that there is no plural form of this word, (there is no /s/ added to homework), then it belonged in the category of mispronounced words. In addition, we also tried to raise the awareness that this word has a potentially problematic morphology, namely with regard to the division of nouns, the groups of nouns which belong to the categories of countable and uncountable nouns.

Moreover, the same has occurred with the word *information* /,ɪnˌfərˈmeɪʃən/, which was pronounced as /ɪnˌfərˈmeɪʃəns/, in particular when students wanted to use the plural form. Here again, a mistake was clearly being made, or perhaps students were merely not aware that this word has no plural form, thus no /s/ is added to the word *information* to make it plural, as it is an uncountable noun. Last but not least is the word *read*, which when used in the third person singular, requires the use of /s/ letter, and this –s letter was pronounced by students as /s/ sound as in /ri:ds/ rather than /ri:dz/. According to Alexander (1998, p. 162) “Verbs are pronounced with a /z/ in the third person: after /b/, /d/, /g/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, vowel + w or r, /v/ and after vowels sees, pays and does” rather than /s/ sound. In addition, Kabashi (2000) consolidates this point by confirming that “verbs are pronounced with /z/ after bases ending in other voiced sounds, e.g. see-sees, play-plays, intend-intends, run-runs, etc” (p. 49).

AN ISSUE WITH A CONFUSING USE OF WORDS

The research found that very often a verb or a noun was used instead of the reverse. However, the students were not aware of this phenomenon at all. Therefore, a confusing use in this case was like the following; the word *sell* pronounced /sel/, was confused with the verb *sale* or even *sail*.

This confusing use was detected from the context and it seems to have been mixed with another verb. It was apparent that students were using the verb *sell* instead of /seɪl/ or /seɪl/.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the students of English Language and Literature Department may know that they make mispronunciations, sometimes they do not make serious attempts to see where the problem with the wrong use stands.

Some of the students of English Language and Literature Department are not aware of the fact that they make mispronunciations, owing to the different pronunciation that they have in their own native Albanian/Macedonian language dialect.

In rare cases words are mispronounced because of the lack of the sounds in students' native language compared to English.

Various words, short and long ones, are found to be mispronounced due to the use of the wrong stress in words, which may merely depend on the length and complexity of words.

Mispronunciation mainly comes as a result of experiences the students bring from elementary and high schools. Textbooks and teachers are two crucial factors that have a large impact on student's progress. First, English books have neglected pronunciation to a subsidiary role of speaking and listening. Second, the English teachers believe that pronunciation cannot be taught, and thus they continue to consider pronunciation lessons of relatively little importance. Lastly, for a long period of time, teachers were the only source in language learning and a model to be followed. As far as pronunciation, cases when English language teachers served as bad models cannot be neglected.

Wrong stress and the complexity of words are almost two separate worlds, as they do not go hand in hand with each other. The wrong stress occurs with both, short and long words. However, mispronunciation happens mainly due to the complexity of words.

It might be concluded that almost all the students in this research were coming from the same language backgrounds, the ones that have shaped their concept on the use of languages. For most of the students these language barriers are difficult to overcome, however, the exception is made with the students who strive to do their best in learning and speaking English.

The other difficulty is that students learn formal British or American accent, however, they hear a lot of informal ones, plus slang. This is one of the crucial factors that a considerable number of students find English pronunciation as one of the most difficult elements in the proper use of the language.

The English classes in the Department of English Language and Literature are mixture of cultures and languages. They all bring experiences of their native languages, such as Albanian,

Macedonian and Turkish. Consequently, the teacher can hear different pronunciations of the same word, different word accent, and sentence stress.

The main pronunciation problem with the Albanian students is that there are no particular rules for the accent in Albanian language, which makes rules in English hard to explain.

Macedonian students have problems with pronunciation of some of the English consonants, such as /ð/, /θ/, which are pronounced as /d/ and /t/, as well as the /ə/ vowel, pronounced as /e/. Turkish students are characteristic for their short vowels and lack of vowel /ə/, which is pronounced as /æ/. They also lack pronunciation of consonants /ð/ and /θ/.

Finally, we might conclude that the biggest problem for the English students is to perceive the differences between an English sound and a corresponding sound in their native language. The habits that have been created with their mother tongue are reflected on all other languages, including English.

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