

LEARNERS' PROBLEMS IN TRANSCRIBING WORDS IN CONNECTED SPEECH

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Abstract. This study is intended to investigate the difficulties encountered by the students of the English department in transcribing words in the connected speech where assimilation occurs. The assimilation investigated is limited to alveolars /t, d, n) to the neighboring sound palatal /j, k, g/. Pronouncing words in connected speech is one of the problems that show up in learning EFL. The way words are spoken in isolation and connected speech may differ significantly. Dealt with the difference, there are two questions to answer in this study. Question one is how students transcribe words in the connected speech where assimilation occurs; question two is to describe what sound is assimilated to what sound. To answer the question of the study, a descriptive qualitative design is applied. Data were collected from 50 students by giving 7 sentences to transcribe where assimilation occurs in a part of the sentences. Students were asked to transcribe the whole sentences and describe what sound has been assimilated to what sound. The result shows that 18 students can transcribe correctly the phonetic transcription of the assimilated sounds and describe what sound is assimilated to what sound. 32 students transcribe the sentences as isolated words and cannot show where assimilation occurs. Thus, there is no description of the assimilation by these students. It leads to say that knowledge of pronouncing words in connected speech is poor. This suggests improvement by giving more practice in pronouncing not only individual words but words in connected speech. Students also need listening exercises to crosscheck the transcription they make while listening.

Key Words: phonetics, difficulties, connected speech, assimilation

INTRODUCTION

Speakers frequently communicate in foreign languages during this moment of globalization, which adds additional dimensions to communication. Learning a language entails mastering grammar, having a broad vocabulary, and being able to read and write fluently. People often communicate in English, which adds new dimensions to communication. English is the most extensively used language in the media, printed books and newspapers, and on the internet. Having proficiency in English implies having more options to obtain news or references offered in English (Pariyanto, 2020).

Pronunciation is unquestionably important in communication, particularly between native and non-native English speakers. Pronunciation is a key element in learning a language without which comprehension would be hindered. It is one of the main factors contributing to intelligibility. Pronunciation is seen as distinct from other components of language proficiency (Thomson & Derwing, 2014). Being unable to pronounce words obstructs communication significantly, especially since it is assumed that learners who are unable to pronounce words are also unable to comprehend them. It means that

teaching pronunciation is an important topic that should be addressed regularly.

Mispronunciation may lead to misunderstanding and may hinder communication almost in the same way as wrong choices of vocabularies do. It may also decrease L2 learners' self-confidence and consequently may reduce their willingness to communicate. The pronunciation of the sounds, how they are made, how they differ, how they sound in different positions of a word, and how they sound in different combinations are referred to as phonetics (Tench, 2011). Learning phonetics allows one to gain a better understanding of how speech is created and broken down (Katz, 2013). For example, acting students must know some phonetics to deal with voice projection and accent learning, while singing students must grasp voice production.

Phonetics is divided into two: segmental phonetics, which is concerned with individual sounds; and suprasegmental phonetics, which is concerned with connected speech's bigger units: phonetics syllables, words, phrases, and texts (Ogden, 2009). When non-native speakers listen to the native ones, they often find difficulty in grasping what is uttered by the natives. This might happen because the words sound different to how they expected. They focus to understand every word while the fact the natives pronounce a connected speech, not in isolation or they are left behind, attempting to decipher the meaning of preceding words. In other words, they fail to understand the most crucial words and do not recognize the words while they listen.

Thus, learning phonetics is fundamental for students' achievement in figuring out how to read and spell words correctly. According to Maiza, correct and adequate pronunciation is required for

good communication since it impacts understanding of the meaning (2020).

The necessity of phonetics relates to the fact that it enables the learner to imitate more precisely than he could without it (Jones, 2014). Phonetic transcription is important since it aids in precise word pronunciation. It is mandatory, especially in the English language. We all know that the same English letter or combination of letters can be spoken or perceived differently in different settings. Understanding how the writing system links to the spoken language is an essential theoretical challenge that underpins the practical problem of teaching initial English literacy. When we encounter an English word, the pronunciation of certain letter combinations in the same letter or different words may be different. The following words which have the same letters <-ough>, but different pronunciation: thought [θɔ:t], rough [rʌf], through [θru:], though [ðʊθ]. Another example is that some consonant letters are silent in pronunciation like in debt, <g> in foreign, <k> in knee and many more words. Thus, it's no surprise that students struggle with English spelling and deducing the pronunciation of words from their written form. In addition, an extra set of symbols is needed to extend the usage of the letters of the alphabet in the study of English word pronunciation. The use of phonetic symbols simplifies the representation of any language's pronunciation. Phonetic symbols could be used for both phonetic notation (representing sounds or sound aspects in a traditional fashion) and phonetic transcription (representing word-sized or, commonly, larger stretches of speech in writing different than the standard spelling) (Mompean, 2020). The spelling of an English word has no impact on its

pronunciation. In English, there are silent letters, and different letter combinations can be used to spell the same sound. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) teaches us how to pronounce English words correctly, including the proper sounds and word stress.

Non-native speakers who are listening to native speakers are especially likely to be perplexed about the meaning of related speech. Anyone learning a foreign language should practice listening to it spoken spontaneously, but English learners have a hard time distinguishing isolated words from connected speech due to the slurring of words. Additionally, Dong and Ren argued that learning a language requires more than just acquiring the concept or format of the language; it also entails being able to properly speak the language (Hashim & Yunus, 2018). Jungle hearing as Cauldwell (2013) had stated, refers to a result of connected speech processing based on the register. As a result, both the intelligibility of native speech for non-native listeners and the intelligibility of non-native speech for native listeners may be impaired as a result of connected speech pronunciation.

Pronouncing words in connected speech cannot avoid the influence of the articulation of one sound and the articulation of the neighbouring sound is called assimilation, which frequently occurs in word boundaries (Skandera and Burleigh, 2005). Assimilation is a normal part of learning a new language. It's also done subconsciously, so speakers aren't always aware of what they're doing and are often astonished when told that the actual sounds they make don't always match the spelling. The rationale for assimilation processes is simple: our articulators (mouth, lips, teeth, etc.) must shift from one position to another -for example, from /n/ to /b/. Being able to state the place of

articulation: bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal and manner of articulation: stops, fricatives, affricates, nasals, liquids, glides (Yule, 2010).

There are various predicted phonetic difficulties that Indonesian EFL students are likely to face when it comes to pronunciation. These issues concern 1) individual vowels and consonants that do not occur in Indonesian or are pronounced differently; 2) vowel combinations and consonant clusters that are not permitted by Indonesian phonotactic constraints; and 3) sound variations in forms of liaison, weak form, elision, and assimilation in connected speech. According to Tata Bahasa Baku Bahasa Indonesia (1993:58), there are six vowel sounds in Indonesian, they are: [a], [i], [u], [ɛ], [o], and [ə] and there are 9 plosive consonants [p], [t], [c], [k], [b], [d], [j], [g], dan [ʔ]; 8 fricatives [f], [v], [x], [h], [s], [ʃ], z, dan x; lateral [l]; thrilled [r] and semivowel [w] dan [y]. These differences in consonants and vowel sounds in Indonesian and English lead to the difficulty in pronouncing the sounds which are not present in Indonesian. In addition, after a certain critical period, it is nearly impossible to acquire the sound system of a foreign language perfectly, it is the individual's pronunciation in the target language that gives the individual away from his or her mother tongue (Lenneberg, 1967). Thus, the fluency of pronouncing the English sounds is influenced by the mother tongue: the quality of the sound, the intonation, and the rhythm. As per what Kelleher believed, learning the target language requires a strong foundation in one's mother tongue. Rather than emphasizing the negative effect of mother language in the learning process, he acknowledged that it plays a constructive role (Fitriani & Zulkarnain, 2019). For instance, when listening to actors who

come from China or India but speaks in English in the film, listeners can directly see the difference in the pronunciation. Referring to what Lenneberg stated above, what adult learners try to do is to pronounce the nearing sounds of English. This happens in Indonesian language society that people whose native language is Batakese will find it difficult to pronounce weak /e/ in Indonesian as only strong /e/ is present in Batakese.

A study dealing with the pronunciation of connected speech conducted by (Ling, 2015) through reading revealed that the subjects' pronunciation in the connected speech was poor, and added that their mother language had a negative impact on their performance. This is following (Ball and Rahilly, 2013) that negative mother tongue transfer would result in poor English connected speech pronunciation and listening comprehension. In another study concerning difficulties in pronunciation conducted to Iranian EFL learners found English vowels more difficult than English consonants, with silent consonant letters posing the greatest difficulty (Jam et.al., 2014). A study conducted by Adeline (2020) stated that students fail to identify silent /g/ before letters <-n-, -m-, and -h->; pronouncing /g/ before letters (-e-, -i-, and -y-); and when to pronounce -g- as [g or dʒ]. The other study conducted by (Ambalegin and Hulu, 2019) revealed that EFL learners found problems in pronouncing sounds /θ/, /ð/, /t/, /z/, /r/, /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /nj/ /ə/, /æ/, and /eɪ/ consonant-closed syllable sound of /k/ which may be caused by mother tongue interference (native language), disparities between Indonesian and English sound systems (phonetic ability), educational history, and environmental background were all considered (amount of exposure). The current study's findings indicate that

English verbal songs have statistically significant positive effects on the connected speech features of adult English learners' speech production. (Ashtiani and Mahdavi, 2015).

Difficulties in pronunciation are also faced by Arab students is concerned with the fact that they must adopt a pattern of pronunciation that they learned in their mother tongue to a new pattern in the target language (Ghounane, 2018). In my opinion, this case also occurs to many other speakers in the world as every language has its specific structure, consonant and vowel symbols which have different production of speech sound in the organs of speech. The result of her study displays that students are not motivated to study pronunciation, and as a result, they do not acquire a command of the language in contact, according to the research.

Dealt with some difficulties faced by students who learn English as a foreign language, it is still reasonable to conduct a study on how students transcribe words in connected speech. This study asks two questions to answer: how do students transcribe words in a connected speech where assimilation occurs, and what sound is assimilated to what sound? The theoretical reason dealt with the place of articulation and description of the place of articulation and manner of articulation is not asked. They are only asked about the change of sound that occurs in pronouncing the connected speech. The reason for only choosing the assimilation of alveolars /t, d, n/ to palatal /j/ and velar /k, g/ is based on the consideration that difficulties of Indonesian students to pronounce English sounds are found difficult; what about sounds in the connected speech the pronunciation of which cannot be taken from the dictionary.

METHOD

Data were collected by assigning the students to transcribe seven sentences where assimilation occurs in parts of the sentences (1) Nice to meet you (... meetyou); (2) Would you like some tea? (Wouldyou ...); (3) Where has that car been all night (... thatcar ...); (4) Can you see that girl over there? (... thatgirl ...); (5) It was a very good concert (... goodconcert...); (6) I've been going out too much lately (... beengoing...); and (7) He's bringing his car (... owncar...). The assimilation investigated is dealt with alveolar sounds /t, d, n/ which are assimilated to velars /k, g/ and palatal /j/.

Students were instructed as follows: "Transcribe the following sentences and show where assimilation occurs and describe what sound is assimilated to what sound". They had 30 minutes to do the transcription and the description and submit the answer directly. They could not extend the time by themselves because if they were late, the system will block them. They were given limited time to minimize the possibility of working together. This task is done online class which is a new experience either to the teacher or the students. They have been taught about assimilation that may occur in connected speech. Practices were given to pronounce and transcribe words in connected speech using International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols in a group and an individual task.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In answering question one of this study, the finding shows that 32 students transcribe the sentences word by word, and these 32 students do not give any description although they have been informed that assimilation occurs somewhere in the sentence and they need to find out where assimilation occurs.

These students have no idea of assimilation in the parts of the sentences given to them. All they can do is transcribe every word in isolation. This shows the students fail to identify that there is a process of assimilation in the task assigned. Pronouncing words in connected speech hasn't been mastered by the learners which may be due to their ability to recognize the possibility of one sound turning to be similar to the neighboring sound. These occurrences represent the impact of the mother tongue on the target language, which is not found in the Indonesian language. Thus, they fail to join the words in a connected way in their phonetic transcription.

Although these 32 (64 %) students fail to transcribe the words in connected speech, they can transcribe the isolated words correctly. The transcription of a word that occurs is called the citation form (Ladefoged and Johnson, 2011). This ability to transcribe the seven sentences cannot guarantee their ability to pronounce well. As the task is done online, the transcription might be copy-pasted from the internet or dictionary. Whereas the mastery of the pronouncing words in the connected speech of the 18 students, who can describe the change of sound because of the process of assimilation, comprehend that there is a change. This is reflected through the phonetic transcription which shows that words are not transcribed words as an isolated words. This is in accord with Larsen-Freeman (2008), who argues that theory has a significant role in making the unconscious conscious and helping students learn to look. The awareness of the place and manner of articulation of consonant sounds in English can help learners to decide the possibility that the final sound of one word is assimilated to the initial sound of the next word in a connected speech. When these

learners transcribe the sentences assigned to them, they can either google or look up the phonetic transcription of the words as isolated. This leads to say that the awareness of the theory is very poor although they have been taught about the pronunciation of connected speech through oral practices in zoom meetings, through videos and they were also asked to do assignments on transcribing sentences and words in isolation.

Concerning errors in pronunciation, there are four types proposed by (Keshavarz, 2008 in Jam et.al, 2014): they are due to the absence of the vowels and consonants in the learners' first language; differences in syllable structure of L1 and L2; the tendency of the students to pronounce the word as it is written; fourth, tendency to pronounce silent letters. In the case of connected speech for Indonesian students, the four types of errors mentioned are excluded, because the process that occurs is dealt with assimilation which is not included in the four types proposed.

The word-by-word phonetic transcription	The intended transcription
['mi:t] and ['ju]	['mitʃu]
['wʊd] and ['ju]	['wʊdʒu]
['ðæt] and ['ka: (r)]	['ðækka:(r)]
['ðæt] and ['gɜ:l]	['ðæggɜ:l]
['gʊd] and ['kɒnsə(r)t]	['gʊkkɒnsə(r)t]
['bi:n] and ['gəʊɪŋ]	['biŋ gəʊɪŋ]
['əʊn] and [ka:(r)]	['əʊŋka:(r)]

The final sound alveolar [t] in 'meet' and palatal [j] in 'you' are combined to form [tʃ] palatal sound, which is called coalescent assimilation. Coalescence is

frequent in common phrases such as the auxiliary plus pronoun of phrases like "did you" or "can't you", and is even known to occur in careful speaking (Cruttenden, 2014: 320) which occurs when two consonants interact and merge to generate a new sound, usually an affricate transcribed without a space between them (Skandera & Burleigh, 2011). The case of the final alveolar sound [d] in 'would' and initial palatal sound [j] in 'you' are combined to form palatal sound [dʒ]. According to Kreidler (2004), this assimilation is called 'palatalization' which is optional across word boundaries.

In the next phrase 'that car', alveolar /t/ changes to velar /k/ for the ease of pronunciation ['ðækka:(r)]. The neighbouring sound /k/ influences /t/ to change to the velar sound. In phrase 'that girl' the pronunciation is ['ðæggɜ:l] where alveolar /t/ changes to velar /g/. This change of sound is of course not provided by the dictionary. In 'good concert', alveolar /d/ is influenced by /k/ sound to become velar ['gʊkkɒnsə(r)t]. In the phrases 'been going' and 'own car', alveolar n changes to velar /g and k/ respectively: ['biŋ gəʊɪŋ] and ['əʊŋka:(r)]. The correct transcription of these phrases are done correctly by 18 students. Their ability to state the change of sounds where the assimilation occurs may be due to their comprehension of the explanation and exercises given to them. But of course, this is a good start for them to master the pronunciation of English sounds.

The phenomena concerning assimilations are also revealed in a study by Liang (2015) that mistakes were divided into three categories: 1) assimilate a /t/ or /d/ sound with a /j/ sound into /tj/ or /dj/; 2) pronounce some function words in their proper weak forms; 3) connect syllables whenever possible (Liang, 2015). Aquil (2012) also found that students had

difficulty recognizing words that made up a connected utterance in listening. This may be because of the awareness of the students on the occurrences of assimilation in connected speech. Thus, when they listen to words in connected speech they think of isolated words and fail to grasp the sounds of connected speech. Ladefoged and Johnson (2011) affirm that when consonants are blended, resulting in allophones that differ from those seen in slow, disconnected languages or in citation forms which leads to saying that in connected speech, many changes may take place. Thus, pronunciation, like grammar, vocabulary, and any other part of language, is not an optional extra for language learners.

A decent pronunciation is vital if a learner's overall goal is to communicate intelligibly with others in another language (Tench, 1981). When someone cannot pronounce words correctly, it leads him to a failure to listen to the words uttered by native speakers of English. The incorrect pronunciation of words in his mind does not match with the correct pronunciation. But it must be confessed that the gap between spelling and pronunciation of words in English is complicated. This is the reality that some English consonants have different pronunciations depending on whether they are spoken alone or in context. The variety is caused by the common practice of liaison, weak form, elision, and assimilation in natural utterances, especially those delivered quickly and in a less formal style. The problem here is that not about the quality of the speech sounds produced but it is more about the accuracy of the pronunciation. For instance, when an Indonesian student finds the words <grey> and <ginger>, he knows that <g> in 'grey' is pronounced /g/ while <g> in 'ginger' is pronounced /dʒ/; the complete

transcription is /grei/ and /dʒɪndʒə(r)/. The student may not pronounce /dʒ/ exactly like what the native speaker of English does, but hearer can understand it. This goal is stated by Vančová (2019) that comprehensibility has replaced accent-free or native-like pronunciation as the primary goal of speech instruction.

Anyhow, pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence and pronunciation intelligibility is extremely important for successful oral communication ((Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Morley, 1991 in Nikbakht (2011)), but pronunciation is also the aspect of language that is most difficult to acquire (Fraser, 2000 in Nikbakht, 2011). Difficulties of English pronunciation are also faced by Bengali EFL learners due to English long vowels which are absent in the Bengali sound system; the next problem is about diphthongs which are found 18 in the Bengali sound system but only eight in the English sound system. This difference makes Bengali learners pronounce the diphthongs as monophthong. Another problem is dealt with plosives; English has six plosive sounds, while Bengali has 20 plosive sounds. This evidence leads to say the absence of sounds in the target language and the native language of the learners tend to cause problems in pronouncing the sounds.

CONCLUSION

From the finding, it can be concluded that the mastery of the students on transcribing words in connected speech is still very low, although they have been given exercises on how to pronounce and transcribe those words in connected speech. This needs to be improved to make the students pronounce words in connected speech better. Their awareness of recognizing the place of articulation needs frequent and continuing practising

to make them familiar with sounds in connected speech supported by relevant exercises, practices and transcribing words. Teachers of English should not only teach pupils how to pronounce individual sounds correctly but also how to emulate fluent connected speech to gain the practical skills of making and interpreting natural communication.

Although there are only 18 (36 %) students out of 50 can show the occurrence of assimilation through the phonetic transcription and description of the sound change, this leads to argue that teaching phonetics is important to grow the consciousness of the learners (especially of English Department) so that they give more attention to learn, practice pronunciation for their success in communicating with other people using English language. The other 32 (64 %) students can transcribe the words individually which means that they can transcribe the words assigned correctly.

Pronunciation plays an important role in English Language Teaching, so techniques for teaching pronunciation to the classroom needs to be varied to make the learners interested in learning pronunciation and phonetic transcription. The practice is better to be given continuously, not only in phonetics or phonology classes but also for other classes such as: speaking, reading, listening classes and more classes like linguistics, literature, pragmatics, discourse analysis, etc.

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