PRONUNCIATION OF THE PAST TENSE FORMS OF ENGLISH REGULAR VERBS AMONG POLITEKNIK SULTAN HAJI AHMAD SHAH STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

One important aspect of spoken language is ‘accuracy’. This is the production of a range of correct and appropriate words and structures as well as correct use of phonological features such as pronunciation, stress, intonation, rhythm et cetera in ESL learning. This study was undertaken to investigate the pronunciation of the past tense forms of verbs ending with ‘ed’ in spelling among 30 selected students of Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah (POLISAS). Mispronunciation of the ‘ed’ sounds of the verbs is one of the common mistakes found among the students. They failed to differentiate /t/, /d/, /ɪd/ and /əd/ sounds of the past tense verbs and become indecisive whether the ‘ed’ should be sounded or silenced. This research was based on synthetic phonics approach by Dombey (2009) in which the respondents ‘build up’ words, through sounding them out, with one grapheme at a time. After analyzing the learners’ work, the findings show that all of the respondents were not directly relying on synthetic phonics of L1 in L2 except for the word ‘wanted’. This proves that there is no transfer of phonological rules from L1 to L2 in the respondents’ pronunciation. The results show that respondents have over generalized the rules of pronouncing verbs ending with ‘ed’ by silencing /t/, /d/, /ɪd/ and /əd/. However, majority of the respondents were able to pronounce the word “wanted” correctly. The inconsistencies in the results show that the respondents have created a complex set of rules which is imperfect but not similar to the rules of L1. As a conclusion, it can be seen that their lack of understanding of the rules in L2 has impeded their pronunciation. Therefore, in order to help these learners, the lecturer has taken a step to give them more exposure pertaining to this aspect through a remedial class.

Keywords: Synthetic Phonics, Overgeneralization, Mispronunciation, Verbs, Language Transfer
1. INTRODUCTION

The formal education in Malaysia starts at the age of 7 in which at that age students learn how to read, write and count in primary school. Mohd Hilmi Haji Ismail (1982) stated that, “the spelling system in Bahasa Malaysia is phonemic in which the word syllables are clear, thus is suitable for teaching reading to students”. This learning method is also called synthetic phonics. Synthetic phonics refers to the act of synthesizing (blending) the sounds of the words after sounding out the graphemes from left to right, all the way through the word. We orally split up (segment) the phonemes from the beginning to end of spoken words and allocate each sound a letter or letter group (Dombey, 2009). For example, the word ‘saya’, in order for us to pronounce it in Bahasa Malaysia we were taught to spell it as:

\[
\text{\textbar es\textbar /ei/ /s\textbar /wai/ /ei/ /ja/}
\]
\[
s + a \quad s a \quad y + a = y a
\]

However, in learning English as a second language, we cannot apply the same technique as L1 as it will not make sense. For example, the word ‘kind’, if we apply the same technique of L1 in L2, it will be spelled as:

\[
\text{\textbar kei\textbar /ai/ /ki/ /en/ /di/ /end/}
\]
\[
k + i \quad k i \quad n + d \quad n d
\]

Thus, in this research, we would like to find out whether there are language transfers of the synthetic phonics of L1 in the rule of pronunciation in L2 and also whether students overgeneralized the rules of pronunciation in L2. Selinker (1972) as cited in Tarone (2006) mentioned that overgeneralization is a term in which the learner shows evidence of having mastered a general rule, but does not yet know all the exceptions to that rule and when the second-language learners make overgeneralization errors, one might argue that they are using the same process as that employed in the first language.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The teaching of pronunciation has always been taken lightly by the lecturers probably because they can still understand the message intended by their students. The pronunciation of the English words in the classroom can also still be “accepted” by both lecturers and students because they can still understand what each other said without having to put much effort in it. However, according to Szynalski (2009), many believe to think that they can communicate in English just because they are able to communicate with their teachers and other students.
“Your teacher has been listening to bad English for years. He or she can understand it much more easily than the average person. Other students are usually from the same country as you. Therefore, they speak English like you and they make the same mistakes. So it is easy for them to understand you”. (Szynalski, 2009)

Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani & Mohammad Reza Ahmadi (2011) stated that second language pronunciation is a cognitive skill for which some people may have more natural aptitude and / or interest and motivation than others, but which everyone can learn to a certain degree if given appropriate opportunities. The main problem that second language learners have with pronunciation has to do with their need to change a conceptual pattern appropriate for their first language that they have internalized in childhood.

The teaching of pronunciation is believed to be as important as grammar. Goh Boon Siew (1984, p.1) mentioned that “a knowledge of the phonological differences and similarities that exist between the native language of these foreign learners of English is therefore a necessary prerequisite towards the understanding of their problems in English pronunciation”.

In this case study, the focus is given on the pronunciation of the past tense forms of the regular verbs because when learners of English as a second language make error in pronunciation, it could be the result of language transfer of the L1 pronunciation pattern in L2.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

“happened”, “cooked” and “searched”. These are only few of the words commonly mispronounced by students. Although the words are still understandable, the mispronunciation of the word does leave a bad impression on the listeners, thus making the students appear to be “less intelligent”. This study is intended to avoid them from mispronouncing the past tense form of the verbs ending with “ed” to avoid further embarrassment. The reason we chose the past tense form of the regular verbs instead of other mispronunciations of the English words is because they are too glaring to be ignored.

Mispronunciation of the past tense form of the verbs ending with ‘ed’ is one of the common mistakes the students made. They failed to differentiate /t/, /d/, /ɪd/ and /əd/ sounds of the past tense verb and become indecisive whether the ‘ed’ should be sounded or silenced.

Pronunciation is one of the areas that lecturers seldom emphasized in the teaching and learning process. Even though some parts of it (phonetic symbols) are incorporated in the English
module, focus is given more on the vocabulary, grammar and technical aspects rather than pronunciation. As a result, students become clueless and unclear as how the word should be pronounced, thus resorting to their understanding of the L1 phonemic system. Mah Boon Yih (2009) mentioned that this is believed to be the result of the phonemic system that has been developed by a second language (L2) learner who is partially proficient in the target language and maintaining some of the first language (L1) features in the target language. However, there is no clear evident to support this statement as they might be other factors influencing pronunciation of L2.

1.3 THE OBJECTIVES
The study aims:

i) To find out if the students are able to pronounce the past tense form of regular verbs correctly based on the approved pronunciation of British English

ii) To find out if the students transfer the phonological rules of L1 when pronouncing the past tense form of regular verbs

iii) To determine the phonological rules that the students made when pronouncing the past tense form of regular verbs

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION
This study is intended to answer 3 research questions.

1. Are the students able to pronounce the past tense form of regular verbs correctly based on the approved pronunciation of British English?

2. Do the students transfer the phonological rules of L1 when pronouncing the past tense form of regular verbs?

3. What are the phonological rules that the students made when pronouncing the past tense form of regular verbs?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

According to Dombey (2009), most of learners of English language use synthetic phonics when trying to pronounce the English words. However, this rule applies only to certain group of languages such
as Spanish and Finnish. Bahasa Malaysia belongs to the same group of language in which the pronunciation of word can be made by pronouncing each of the syllables of the word. Therefore, the main concern of this study is to gain some invaluable insights whether the students rely on synthetic phonics in the pronunciation of L2. If the selected respondents rely on synthetic phonics, this will prove that there is language transfer in the linguistic system of L1 to L2.

Moh Boon Yih (2009) stated that, “English as a second language (ESL) learning is a gradual transferring process from L1 to L2. Each developmental stage learners formulate their own set of L2 grammar rules that are imperfect yet though they are not L1 rules alike. In other words, the L2 learners generate their own structured rules of language at any stage in L2 development and the rules become increasingly complex.”

1.6 SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY
There are many factors influencing second language learning. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus is on the dependency of synthetic phonics of L1 in pronouncing L2 words. If there is, it can be said that there is a language transfer in the pronunciation system of L1 in L2. Besides that, there is also a possibility that the respondents over generalized the phonemic system in L2. Therefore, other factors are not included or discussed.

This study was limited to 30 Semester 5 students taking Diploma in Mechanical Engineering (DKM 5) from Mechanical Engineering Department of Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah (POLISAS). Therefore, the results of this study do not necessarily represent students from other courses or departments.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW
According to Interlanguage Theory as cited in Tarone (2006), “psychological structure latent in the brain” is triggered among L2 learners in second language learning. Therefore, learners develop a set of rules of L2 based on their schemata of L1. Although not all rules of L1 are applicable in L2, learners gradually generate a new complex set of rules as they are learning L2. Overuse / overgeneralization of the pronunciation rules in L2 is evidenced with the avoidance of pronouncing certain phonemes appear in the spelling.

According to Dombey (2009), “synthetic phonics teaches children to “build up” words, though sounding them out, and one grapheme at a time. This works well for languages such as Spanish and Finnish. But it simply does not work for many of the commonest words of English. Given this complexity, the term ‘decoding’, when applied to reading English, must be taken to mean
more than synthetic phonics.” This the same case for Bahasa Malaysia whereas the spelling of the words dictates its pronunciation.

Kachru and Nelson (2006, p.42) mentioned that “the multilingual users of English language base their systems on the system they know best that of one or more of the other languages in their repertoires”. Goh Boon Siew (1984) added that “those sound features of English that do not exist totally in Malay pose the most difficult and serious pronunciation problem areas for Malay learners of English”.

According to the theory of Contrastive Analysis (the study of a pair of languages with a view to identify their structural and similarities) as cited in Gass (1983) the wider the differences between the two languages, the more negative transfers are to be expected.

According to Odlin, T (1989:27), “transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired”.

David (2007) stated that Positive Transfer occurs when the structure of both languages is the same whilst Negative Transfer occurs when speakers transfer items and structures that are different in both languages. He further explained “the more similar the two languages are, the more the learners is aware of the relationship between them, the more positive transfer will occur”

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative approach as according to Patton (2002, p.4), quantitative method was objective and scientific as it deals with numbers and it was based on the collection and analysis of numerical data.

3.1 The Respondents

30 students taking Diploma in Mechanical Engineering from Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah, Kuantan, Pahang, East Coast Region, Malaysia were randomly chosen to participate in this study.

3.2 Instrumentation and Data Collection

Students were given a set of 10 words ending with ‘ed’. They were asked to pronounce the words in isolation according to their understanding. Their voices were recorded and later transcribed to see the results.
3.3 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed in the form of percentages and then bar graphs were plotted to give a better picture of the findings. The researchers transcribed the words and then counted the errors of pronunciation made by the students in percentage. Students were told that this is not part of their assessment, thus, they were not under pressure. The words were first jumbled up to avoid potential uniformity when pronouncing the words.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected is based on respondents’ pronunciation of the past tense form of regular verbs ending with ‘ed’ in spelling. Below is the data obtained from the respondents:

4.1 Respondents’ Pronunciation of the Selected Regular Verbs based on the Approved Pronunciation of British English

Table 1: Respondents’ Pronunciation of the Selected Regular Verbs based on the Approved Pronunciation of British English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Correct Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooked/peaked</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framed/framed</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted/wanted</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searched/spied</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healed/heid</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotted/spuld</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faxed/feakst</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed/kid</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dented/dentd</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flushed/flug</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the respondents’ pronunciation of the selected regular verbs based on the approved pronunciation of British English. It is apparent that majority of the respondents managed to pronounce the verb ‘wanted’ correctly (n=79%). 13% of the respondents were able to articulate the word ‘killed’ correctly. A tenth of the students were able to pronounce ‘searched’ and ‘healed’ and 7% were able to pronounce the verb ‘framed’. The respondents were not able to pronounce the verbs ‘cooked’, ‘spotted’, ‘faxed’, ‘dented’ and ‘flushed’ correctly.
4.2 Respondents’ Transfer of Phonological Rules of L1 when pronouncing the Selected Regular Verbs

Table 2: Respondents’ Transfer of Phonological Rules of L1 when pronouncing the Selected Regular Verbs

Table 2 shows the transfer of phonological rules of L1 by the respondents when pronouncing the selected regular verbs. Majority of the respondents did not transfer the phonological rule of L1 when pronouncing the selected regular verbs in L2. 79% of the respondents pronounced the /əd/ sound for the word ‘wanted’ and 43% for the word ‘dented’. Some of respondents did however pronounce /əd/ sound for the word ‘flushed’ (n=30%) and ‘killed’ (n=23%). For the word ‘cooked’, 13% respondents uttered the sound of /əd/, a tenth of the students also did the same for the words ‘framed’, ‘searched’ and ‘healed’ and 4% for the words ‘spotted’ and ‘faxed’.

4.3 The Phonological Rules that the Students made when Pronouncing the Past Tense Form of Regular Verbs

Table 3: The rule that the students made when pronouncing the past tense form of regular verbs.
Table 3 shows the rules that the students made when pronouncing the past tense form of the selected regular verbs. The findings show that respondents have over generalized the rules of pronouncing verbs ending with “ed” by silencing /t/ which can be seen in the words ‘cooked’ (n=64%), ‘searched’ (n=59%), ‘faxed’ (n=49%) and ‘flushed’ (n=59%). The respondents had also silenced the /d/ as in the words ‘framed’ (n=72%), ‘healed’ (n=47%) and ‘killed’ (n=60%). Lastly, they did not make the sound /ɪd/ as in the verbs ‘spotted’ (n=49%) and ‘dented’ (n=57%).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The result indicates that the respondents are not directly relying on synthetic phonics of L1 in L2. This proves that there is no language transfer of the linguistic system of L1 in L2. The inconsistency in the result shows that respondents have created a complex set of rules which are imperfect but not similar to the rule of L1. However, their lack of knowledge and understanding of phonemic system prevent them from pronouncing the words correctly.

Majority of the respondents failed to pronounce most of the regular past tense verbs correctly by making no ending sound at all. Bahasa Malaysia is a language that uses synthetic phonic pronunciation system. The system is based heavily on the spelling of the word, thus, every syllable will be sounded/pronounced accordingly. In this case study, the respondents’ mother tongue which is Bahasa Malaysia has slightly impeded the pronunciation of L2 (specifically the word ‘wanted’). Therefore, the overgeneralization of synthetic phonics of L1 is not very evident in this study with small number of respondents over generalizing the sound of /əd/ for every word ending with ‘ed’ in spelling.

The data shows that /əd/ sound was not extensively over generalized in pronouncing the ‘ed’ sound of the words. According to Mah Boon Yih (2009), overuse occurs when a learner fails to observe the boundaries of a rule. In this case, the respondents were able to understand that the spelling of the words does not necessarily tally with the pronunciation. For example, the word ‘cooked’ is not pronounced as /kukəd/ and ‘framed’ is pronounced as /frɛrməd/.

It appears that the respondents have formed a rule that states most of the words ending with /d/ and /t/ end with no sound. This proves that majority of the respondents have developed a new set of rules for L2 which is yet to be refined for future use. This is in line with what is stated by Mah Boon Yih (2009), “each developmental stage learners formulate their own set of L2 grammar rules that are imperfect yet though they are not L1 rules alike”.

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6.0 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

It is recommended that;

1. Lecturers should allocate more hours to the teaching of the past tense form of verbs ending with “ed”.

2. Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) for teaching pronunciation should be introduced in the classroom as it can be an effective tool. It “provides electronic visual feedback (EVF), which can help meet this essential need by showing the exact sound features that the learners produce and thereby drawing attention to changes that they need to make” Lambacher (1999,p 138) as cited in Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani & Mohammad Reza Ahmadi(2011)

3. Phonemic system specifically on past tense words ending with ‘ed’ in spelling to be incorporated in the syllabus of semester one module. We believe that students need early exposure so that later on they will have the schemata or background knowledge when they are advancing to the next semester.

4. Drilling technique to be used in teaching them the phonemic system of the language because this will help them understand the rule better.
REFERENCES


