

DIFFICULTIES IN DEALING WITH THE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

DIFICULDADES PARA LIDAR COM A PRONÚNCIA INGLESA

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RESUMO:

Este artigo trata-se das dificuldades que aprendizes, em geral, enfrentam ao adquirir a língua inglesa. Tem como propósito enfatizar que é extremamente necessário para os estudantes dominar a pronúncia correta. Fala a respeito da interferência que os fonemas da língua materna tem na fala dos aprendizes. O trabalho também dá ênfase à importância de aprender a transcrição fonética inglesa a fim de te ajudar aprimorar suas habilidades de pronúncia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dificuldades. Pronúncia. Transcrição fonética. Fonemas. Interferência.

ABSTRACT:

This article deals with the difficulties that learners, in general, face when acquiring the English language. It has as a purpose to emphasize that is extremely necessary for the students to master the proper pronunciation. It talks about the interference which the phonemes of the mother tongue has in the learners' way of speaking. The work also gives emphasis to the importance of learning the English phonetic transcription in order to help you to improve your pronunciation skills.

KEYWORDS: Difficulties. Pronunciation. Phonetic Transcription. Phonemes. Interference.

Introduction

The main objective of this article is to point out one of the students' barrier when studying the English language. This work will deal with the difficulties in pronouncing the English words, which most learners go through, caused by the lack of correlation between spelling and writing of English. It will be used just a few examples to show the mispronunciation problems. The research also highlights the relevance of having a command of the pronunciation skills for an effective communication.

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1 Correlation of English

When you start to study English, one of the things that you notice immediately is the difference between orthography and pronunciation of the language. In English, the lack of correlation of writing and way of speaking is, certainly, much bigger than any other European language, this is, you do not read English in the same way that you write it. This difference leads a great number of learners to have problems and make a lot of mistakes when pronouncing the words, especially beginners.

To understand better the Modern English, you must analyze the history of the language. According to Campos (2004, p. 12):

The period of the Modern English goes on from the end of the 15th century to the beginning of the 16th century until the current days. The first part of this period has suffered gradual loss of declinations, through the neutralization, and loss of atonic vowels at the end of word and through the beginning of the revolution in the phonology. Practically all the vowel sounds, including diphthongs, have suffered alterations and some consonants have stopped being pronounced. (my translation).

As you can notice above, the English language has gone through a lot of transformations in its history, especially in relation to the phonology. These changes have altered the pronunciation of the words, but not the writing in general. These changes have occurred due to the influence of different languages and dialects such as French, Latin, Celt mixed to Anglo-Saxon. According to Kreider (2004) “when Angles, Saxons, and Jutes migrated from the continent of Europe to the island of Britain in the fifth century AD, they spoke a language which was to become English.” You can observe that English is a language derived from many others. The way of speaking is different from the way of writing in every language, but in English, this is even worse.

The discrepancy in English is bigger than in the other languages. In Portuguese, Spanish or Italian, for instance, you pronounce approximately in the same way that you write it. According to Campos:

The system of vowels sounds of the English language before the 15th century was quite similar to the other languages from the Western Europe, including today's Portuguese. therefore, the current lack of correlation between orthography and pronunciation of the Modern English which observes, especially in the vowels is, in great part, consequence of this change occurred in the 15th and 16th centuries. (2004, p. 12)².

The English pronunciation is complicated and confusing for learners, because the system of vowels and consonants have a lot of different sounds. However, there is no graphical accent to show these differences from one sound to another. This is the reason why it is so hard for non-native speakers to deal with the English pronunciation. Besides, it is not possible to speak English with the same phonology you have in your own language, in the case Portuguese.

2 Spelling interferences

In relation to the spelling interference, “the written language is a significant source of EFL learners in Brazil. The higher the spelling inconsistency is, the more negative the influence on pronunciation will be” (SCHÜLTZ, 2008). So, the interference of the mother tongue is very high in the articulation of the English phonemes. An example of spelling interference is when the students tries to pronounce words like *love* /lʌv/ or *color* /'kʌlə/ they say /lɔ:v/ and /'kɔ:lor/ because the written form is spelled with an “o”. This way, they do not notice the difference between the /ʌ/ and /ɔ:/ sounds, because these phonemes are very close. Besides, the students are more accustomed to the writing than to the pronunciation of English. It is one of the factors which leads learners to mispronounce so many words. Schütz (2008) affirms that “in the study of English as a foreign language we must replace the saying *seeing*

² My translation.

is believing with hearing is believing.” The English writing is deceiving sometimes, leading you to mistakes. What you see written is not exactly what you must pronounce.

3 Neutral vowel sounds

When analyzing some phonological aspects of English, you must realize that there is a considerable neutralization of the vowels. Almost all the words have neutral sounds. For example, in a word like *dangerous* /ˈdeɪndʒərəs/ the first vowel “a” is in the stressed syllable and has the /eɪ/ sound and the vowel “e” and the diphthong “ou” are in the unstressed syllable, therefore, they are neutralized and have the same /ə/ sound. Every neutralized vowel has the schwa sound, no matter what vowel it is. The schwa is the most used sound of English. As a general rule, learners do not use this neutralization of the sounds that is so common in the English language. They replace, in most cases, the /ə/ sound with /e/ and /o/ sound from Portuguese which do not occur in English. It happens because of the approximation of the phonemes. About that, Mascherpi (1970, p. 151-1540) quoted by Sant’Anna has verified that:

There are similarities and differences and that the student will hear, in the beginning of the English language learning, just the phonemes of his own language, the Portuguese language. When the student comes across similar or falsely similar phonemes, the teacher must help him to transfer the linguistic habits with some modifications until he is able to produce correctly the phonemes similar to the foreign language³...

Teachers need to master well all the English phonemes so that they can clarify the phonological differences between Portuguese and English in order to solve the students’ difficulties in reproducing the proper sounds. As you can see above, the student is not able to identify the different phonemes of English by ear. The teacher’s role is to teach the students

³ My translation.

the most difficult phonemes whenever they have problems with the articulation. The oral practice in class is extremely important to familiarize the students with the new sounds. It is important that they listen to the audios and repeat them aloud in order to practice the right articulation of the words. The more the students practice the new sounds, the more they get used to them.

4 Phoneme replacements

About the phoneme replacement of the English language with the ones of the mother tongue, Steinberg (1985, p.17-21) quoted by Sant'Anna (2003, p. 61-62) analyzes that:

After listing the phonemes which belongs to the English language and not to the Portuguese one, he highlights that the articulatory proximity can be one of the student's first difficulties when he tries to imitate the sounds strange to his native language. It means that, when hearing, the students does not realize that a determined phoneme does not belong to the phonological system of his mother tongue; when trying to pronounce it, he uses the phonemes which he knows in his language. As the student did not recognize the "different" phoneme, he will use a phoneme of his language that he "thinks" to have noticed and, thus, he will be before a problem caused by the articulatory proximity⁴.

An instance of this problem can be noticed when the students listen to words such as *think* /θɪŋk/, *thing* /θɪŋ/ or *with* /wɪθ/ automatically, they will repeat them like this /fɪnk/, /fɪŋ/ and /wɪf/, because they cannot recognize the voiceless sound /θ/ which represents the "th" that does not occur in Portuguese and will replace it with the sound /f/ that is very alike by ear. In the same way, some words like *the* /ðə/, *they* /ðeɪ/ or *brother* /ˈbrʌðər/ will result in /de/, /dei/ and /ˈbrɔ:der/. The voiced sound /ð/ which is the other sound of the "th" is replaced

⁴ Author's italics, my translation.

by the sound /d/, the sound /ə/ by the sound /e/ and the sound /ʌ/ by the sound /ɔ:/, consequently different from the standard pronunciation. The word *the* has changed completely in this example above. Generally, every word with the digraph “th” is problematic for learners. Certainly, the “th” sound is the most difficult for the students to learn how to pronounce correctly. It is hard to articulate this phoneme because you have to put your tongue between the teeth in order to produce it properly. It is important to know “if you change one phoneme for another you change the word.” (UNDERHILL, 2002, p. viii). This fact of substituting the English phonemes with the similar ones in Portuguese is very common among learners. It always happens when the word is very hard to articulate and it requires a different position of the vocal tract.

5 Varied sounds of the vowels

When comparing the two languages, you can notice that English has much more phonemes than Portuguese to represent the graphemes. For example, in Portuguese, there are five vowels (a e i o u) and seven sounds /a ɛ e i ɔ o u/, aside from nasal sounds and diphthongs. In English, there are the same five vowels (a e i o u) and twelve sounds / i: ɪ ʊ u: ɛ ə ɜ: ɔ: æ ʌ ɑ: ɒ/. Many of these sounds are very close, but not the same. In addition, each vowel has varied sounds, take as an example the letter “a” in *name* /neɪm/, *bad* /bæd/, *care* /kɛr/, *are* /ɑ:r/, *call* /kɔ:l/, *arrive* /ə'raɪv/ and *village* /'vɪlɪdʒ/. In these examples seen, the vowel “a” has varied seven times. Also, the others vowels “e”, “i”, “o” and “u” have four, five or more sounds each. This variation makes the students very confused when reading the words. Another aspect which learners have to pay close attention is that, in English, there are short and long vocalic sounds. The students need to take that into consideration when pronouncing. For example, words such as *ship* /ʃɪp/ and *sheep* /ʃi:p/ cannot be articulated in the same way. The first word has short vowel sound /ɪ/ and the second one has long vowel sound /i:/. What separates the two words is the duration of the vowel. If you do not make the

difference between them, you can make your listener confused, consequently interfering in the communication.

Having a command of the standard pronunciation is a very important tool for a good communication in English. According to Saylor (2005):

Proper pronunciation means reproducing the sound of the word through speech in such a way that any fluent speaker of the language would effortlessly know and understand the message. Improper pronunciation causes a breakdown in communication and requires more effort to understand. The meaning between the words like effect and affect are easily confused if the pronunciation is not clear.

As you can observe above, acquiring the pronunciation skills is something that learners of English should aim for. Speaking clearly is fundamental to be well understood by listeners. The reason is that when speaking English, if you emit confusing sounds, your listener will have to make a bigger effort to follow your speech to understand the message. Studying English is not only learning grammar rules but also learning how to communicate orally. If the student does not find a way to improve his ability to speak, his difficulties in dealing with the spoken English will affect very much when interacting with other people, especially with English native speakers.

6 How to improve pronunciation

There are a lot of ways to become better your ability to pronounce the English words, one of them is to learn how to deal with the phonetic transcriptions used in the dictionaries. There, you will find the standard pronunciation of each entry. About improving pronunciation Lee (2011) emphasizes that:

A useful strategy is to teach students to use English dictionaries and understand the phonetic transcription system used in dictionaries to represent pronunciation. This will not only build student awareness of the phonetic

system of English, but also help them understand and visualize English syllable stress, another difficult aspect of pronunciation for some learners.

Without doubt, the best way of acquiring the proper pronunciation is through the phonetic symbols. For sure, they are very hard for the students to learn, because some of them are letters of the alphabet like /b/ or /d/ and others are different symbols like /θ/ or /ʃ/. But you can solve your problems with pronunciation by mastering them. The first thing to do is to try to find out how each symbol, which represents the sounds of English, is articulated. It is needed to know where the places of articulation are of each one. For instance, the places of articulation of /f/ are the upper teeth and the lower lip. Most dictionaries use the symbols of the IPA⁵. Knowing these symbols will make you more confident in relation to the English pronunciation. You intonate an English word is through its phonetic transcription not through its spelling what would lead you to the mispronunciation. The more you learn about phonetics, the better you pronounce the complicated words of English. Perhaps, one of the reasons for the students to have troubles with pronunciation is because there is not an appropriate study about the English sounds in courses in order to help them to learn more about phonetics. The only resource that the language courses use is “listen” and “repeat”. As you see, in English, there are lots of complicated words, a simple listening would not be enough for you to repeat them correctly as analyzed previously. It is needed to go deeper into the subject to reach the proper pronunciation.

7 Language variation

Another factor which makes the student of English get mixed up is the variety of pronunciation. In relation to this Kreidler (p. 1-2, 2004) stands out that:

In every language there is variety. A language varies from one place to another, from one era to another, from one occasion to another. The

⁵ International Phonetic Alphabet

differences may be in choice of words to express a meaning, as with *petrol* versus *gas(oline)* or *dual carriageway* versus *divided highway*. Differences exist in word formation: for the past tense of the verb *dive* does one say *dived* or *dove*? There are possible differences in the ways that words are put together to form phrases and sentences: would you say, for instance, *They gave it me*, or *They gave me it*, or *They gave it to me*? In this book we are concerned with differences in pronunciation. Some words are spoken differently by different speakers of English, for instance *either*, *garage*, and *tomato*. We are more concerned, however, with systematic differences; for example, some speakers of English pronounce an R in such words as *car* and *horn* and other speakers do not; for the former *spa* and *spar* sound different, for the latter group the two words are homophones. There are interesting differences in the vowel systems of different dialects: how different are *stock* and *stalk* (and *stork*), for instance?⁶

So, as you see in every language has variations in writing, vocabularies and, of course, in pronunciation too. there is no uniform language, especially when talking about English which is spoken all over the world. The variation is inevitable from country to country. The differences between American English and British English in pronunciation can make the student confused. For example, which pronunciation is correct, *ask* /ɑ:sk/ or /æsk/? Both are absolutely correct. This is just accent, the first pronunciation is British and the second one is American. The student needs to be aware of this and learn how to deal with these accents. They can opt for one of the standards to have as a model to follow.

Conclusion

As a result, you can observe that having constant problems with pronunciation is something that might affect very much your ability to communicate with efficiency. It is expected that this theoretical research may have contributed for the importance and reflections about the English pronunciation in the process of learning a foreign language. It concludes that the solution to the difficulties in dealing with the pronunciation is the oral practice of words by listening to them. The work also stands out that learning how to master the phonetic

⁶ Author's italics.

symbols of English will make you more confident when choosing the best pronunciation to follow as a standard.

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