

Identifying and Treating Mispronounced Front Vowel Sounds Through Pronunciation Activities: A Case Study of Students with Gujarati Mother Tongue



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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to detect the front vowels which are wrongly pronounced by students with Gujarati as their L1. It also takes into account the replacements made by these students while speaking English and proposes an activity based teaching of pronunciation to correct the mispronounced front vowels. The results of this experimental procedure are presented in this research paper wherein special efforts have been made to dwell into the nature of phonetic learning or their neglect.

Introduction

There are twenty distinctive vowel sounds in English made up of twelve Pure Vowels (Monophthongs) and eight Vowel Glides (Diphthongs). However in Gujarati language, there are no corresponding similar vowel sounds that are present in English language. Therefore, students with their Gujarati mother tongue or those learning through Gujarati medium face difficulties in pronunciation of certain English vowel sounds while speaking the language.

This research aims at finding whether students who have Gujarati as their L1 have difficulties in the use of front vowels. The research would also extend to identifying which front vowels are commonly replaced by which vowels and would also test the practicality of using exercise-module of phonetics to teach English pronunciation

of vowel sounds. The effectiveness of this experiment will also be analyzed.

Rationale

Gujarat lacks in proficient speakers of English. Gujarat has experimented with vivid methods of language teaching; regrettably none of them have been able to address the real need and problem of the Gujarati speaking English aspirant. A normal student either from Gujarati or English medium educated from Gujarat lacks pronunciation inputs right from school to Higher education.

“English in India is used to integrate culturally and linguistically pluralistic societies. Integration with the British or American culture is not the primary aim.” (Kachru, 1976)The notion that there is or should be a Standard English does not match the reality of language acquisition.

The emphasis now is on “intelligibility” of speech when considering what should be taught and yet the question remains which standard model to follow. “*Intelligibility’ could serve as a practical guideline to set up limits beyond which no concession would be allowed.*” (Prator, 1986)

Here in this research, the researcher has taken British RP(Received Pronunciation) as a reference point, which would not be an end in itself but the means for the students with Gujarati as their L1 to overcome certain difficulties they face in communication of English pronunciation. Students for Master of Arts (English) were selected as part of this research. Their educational & social (Gujarati mother tongue) was not a barrier for them to take up a masters in English. Most of these students have gone through more than three years of undergraduate learning in English.

The rationale behind conducting this research was to elicit the problems related to the use of front vowels and discern the nature of the problem. Once the identification was carried out, an interactive activity based module for teaching phonetics was to be conducted in order to remedy the problem, if any.

Literature Review

In any kind of Language Teaching aspect of pronunciation is of prime concern. Educating students in the use of proper pronunciation will lead them to use language in an exemplary manner. Teaching & learning of pronunciation determines clarity of expression. Students’

wrong pronunciation at times distorts and twists the meaning; it is the fulcrum on which the meaning adjusts itself. The end product would be a jargon defined by Bloomfield (1933-473) “*A nobody’s language but only a compromise between a foreign speaker’s version and so on, in which each party imperfectly reproduces the others reproduction.*” We live in a multi-cultural-lingual society and to overcome all the hurdles in speech is a tricky situation to deal. Therefore, one has to eliminate all those learned sound units and acquire new sound units with considerable patience, practice and determination to overcome habits. The importance of learning pronunciation cannot be emphasized enough for any student at any stage of academic & personal growth. In the background of proven research about the importance of pronunciation development, it becomes imperative that it calls for immense creativity & personal effort from a teachers’ side. Curriculum, teaching material, teachers’ training & teaching methodologies have to be reviewed frequently to evade stagnancy, deterioration and poor performance in ELT.

“It is essential to understand us amongst ourselves well than to understand outsiders. When the variety of English you speak serves the purpose, the ramifications of the doctrine lose its importance.”(Prator, 1986)

Pronunciation teaching does not find a place in our traditional language teaching class. This stands true for the current state of English teaching in schools and colleges where the student is usually not aware of

the existence of Phonetics. The teacher of foreign languages, on the other hand, is very well aware of the existence of Phonetics; though s/he often may not like it. Some teachers will protest that it is not in their power for various reasons to become phoneticians; others will deny, often with heat, that it is necessary. These feelings may spring from the fact that knowledge of the existence of Phonetics is not always accompanied by knowledge of its importance in the arena of language teaching. Therefore the question arises *if it is necessary for a language teacher to be a phonetician?* The answer would be all language teachers in some respect are phoneticians. It is not possible of the practical purposes to teach a foreign language to any kind of learner without paying some attention to pronunciation; and any attention to pronunciation is phonetics. The language teacher will always find himself/herself handling questions of pronunciation. Since the questions of pronunciation cannot be avoided, the simpler it is made for both, teacher and student, the better. It is not proper to ask whether phonetics is necessary for language teachers the proper question to ask is *how good their phonetics is to be?* "Pronunciation development should be dealt as a skill which is independent to reading & writing skills." Language skills development should include scope for teaching of pronunciation as a separate skill as it is 'one of the major aspects of fluency in a language.' Hence pronunciation should be taught as a separate skill at all stages of education. Though the importance of teaching

pronunciation is an ascertained field of study, its absence in the language classroom fails to build the students' interest in the teaching practice. The sample group in this study was with Gujarati mother tongue. The group of students as expected grappled with unknown sound units from a language which is primarily not their own, thus the intrinsic motivation is to gain momentum in order to make the learning more interactive and the retaining more plausible. Many researchers in the field of pronunciation teaching have stated low interest level among students which has been due to complete negligence on teaching of pronunciation.

Research Methodology

Objectives

1. To identify whether students have problems in front vowels usage while speaking English.
2. To identify which front vowels are commonly mispronounced.
3. To identify which vowel glides are employed to replace front vowels while speaking.
4. To treat the afore mentioned replacement with an aim of correcting the errors made in the use of front vowels through activities.
5. To verify whether the teaching of phonetics through activities has yielded positive results.

Research Design

This is an experimental study hence the data collection and analysis is quantitative in nature. However, when students are involved – the study cannot be carried out wholly in a controlled environment. There are certain aspects that affect the results/ outcome of the study. Hence, in order to include qualitative aspect, the researcher included interviews as the data-analysis technique.

Thus, the research design included :

- Pre-recording
- Teaching phonetic variations in the classroom through exercises
- Post-recording

Sample

Sample Size 30 students

Educational background: Bachelors of English, Masters of English (Pursuing)

Activities

The following games (exercise module) were selected & adapted according to the problematic vowel sound found in pre-recording and modules were developed for the same.

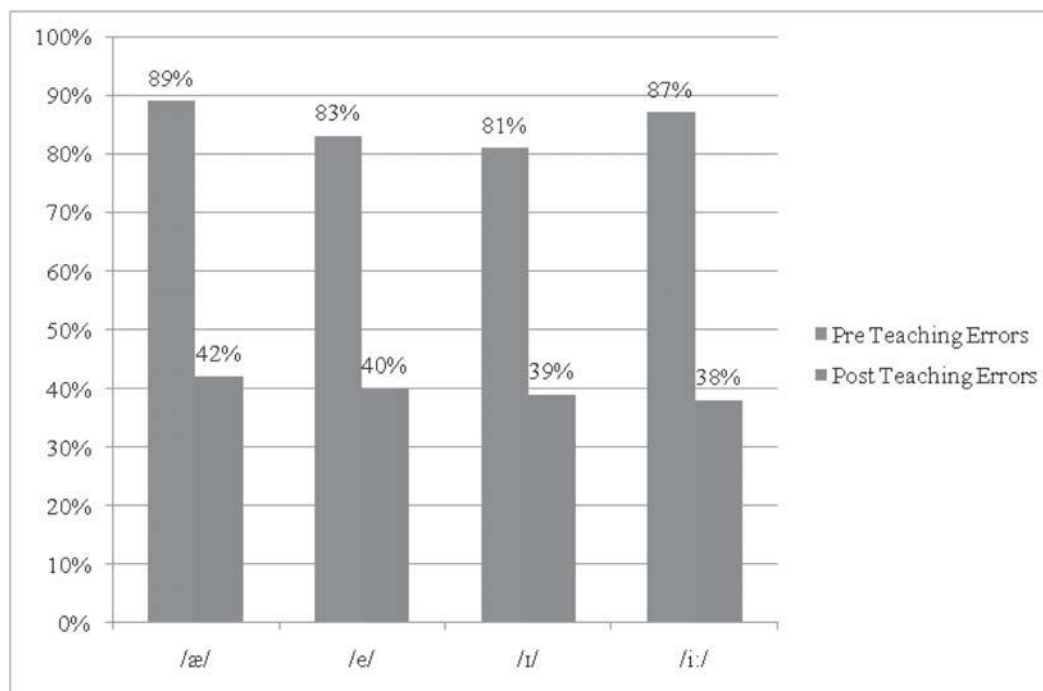
- I. Vowel Puzzle
- II. Odd one out
- III. Identify Figures

Through the trial and error sessions of the research, the investigator kept a close watch on the students and their levels of interest during the activities. The researcher also conducted informal interviews through few unstructured set of questions to examine students' perception on the practice of using activities for the teaching of pronunciation & observe the pronunciation of sounds in a natural environment. A post-recording test was conducted to verify whether the students were able to pronounce the sounds they learnt in the class correctly. The results are described further.

Before the experiment began a pre-teaching recording was conducted in order to detect gaps in students' pronunciation of front vowels, then the students were taught different aspects of phonetic variations in vowel sounds of English through specific exercises, eventually at the end of classroom activities a post-teaching recording was conducted with the same sample group. Thus the results are compared to reassess the performance and measure the effectiveness of the exercises used to improve their pronunciation skills.

Data Analysis

The sample consisted of 30 students pursuing their post graduate program (M.A) in English; majority of these students had completed their bachelors in English hence it can be recorded that these students have had minimum of three years of language exposure.



As shown in the Pre-recording score students were not able to pronounce the front vowel sounds. For example – bad, breath, bid, feel, fresh. The average performance was very low as can be seen from the table and most of the students (90%) pronounced the sounds erroneously. After the pre-recording, phonetics games (exercise module) were introduced in the language classroom. The results, after the use of activities showed a clearly reduction in the number of students making the same error.

Findings

The detailed comparative chart present above proves that there was a 50% improvement in the pronunciation capacity of the students. The comparative analysis of the two tables (Annexure I and II) is as

such:

1. Pre-treatment there were 89% students who were pronouncing the sound /æ/ wrong. This was reduced to only 42% post the treatment.
2. 83% students were erroneously articulating the sound /e/ which was reduced to only 40% post the treatment.
3. The percentage of students pronouncing the sound /j/ wrong was at around 81% which dropped to only 39% in the post-teaching.
4. /i:/ was wrongly pronounced by 87% in the pre-teaching stage, however, the number reduced to only 38% post the experiment.
5. It was also found that /æ/ and /e/ are

replaced by /ei/ by most of the students which results in wrong pronunciation.

6. From the experiment it was deciphered that /j/ and /i:/ are interchanged leading to wrong pronunciation.
7. The use of activity based teaching of pronunciation has yielded positive results.

Conclusion

From the research it is evident that in the post-test students showed awareness of different phonetic sounds. The result amounted to 50% success in achieving the desired phonetic learning. Those who

succeeded to maintain sustained efforts in speaking drills were found to be phonetically correct in the interviews conducted to notice the phonetic learning and thereby a change in their otherwise phonetically incorrect spoken language.

From the experiment it was evident that adults will not necessarily be able to learn an intelligible pronunciation in English without consistent, focused support & instruction. It is unreasonable to expect rapid change. Both students and teachers must guard against unrealistic expectations of how long it takes for improvements to be made in pronunciation. This implies that pronunciation learning must be continued outside the classroom.

Table-1 Consolidated data of Pre-teaching findings - Annexure I

<u>Pre-teaching</u>					
Sr.No.	Vowel Sound	Words	No. of students pronouncing it wrong (out of 30)	Percentage (out of 30)	Consolidated %
1	/æ/	average	27	90%	89%
		activity	28	93%	
		understand	23	77%	
		standard	29	97%	
2	/e/	textbooks	26	87%	83%
		instead	26	87%	
		emphasis	23	77%	
		technique	24	80%	
3	/i/	college	30	100%	81%
		filled	24	80%	
		willingness	16	53%	
		finish	27	90%	
4	/i:/	need	25	83%	87%
		lead	27	90%	
		feed	26	87%	

Table-2 Consolidated data of Post-recording findings - Annexure I

Post-teaching					
Sr.No.	Vowel Sound	Words	No. of students pronouncing it wrong (out of 30)	Percentage (out of 30)	Consolidated %
1	/æ/	Average	12	40%	42%
		Activity	13	43%	
		Understand	11	37%	
		Standard	14	47%	
2	/e/	Textbooks	13	43%	40%
		Instead	12	40%	
		Emphasis	11	37%	
		Technique	12	40%	
3	/i/	College	13	43%	39%
		Filled	12	40%	
		Willingness	10	33%	
		Finish	12	40%	
4	/i:/	Need	13	43%	38%
		Lead	11	37%	
		Feed	10	33%	

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