

Twisting and Twirling Tongues: The Taste of Time

Dr. G. J. Hamlin, P.G.C.T.E., Ph.D.

Abstract

Intelligible pronunciation is the basis for efficient and effective communication in any language and so in English. Poor pronunciation of the English language will mislead others and may also create embarrassing situations. To speak English accurately the different articulators of speech sounds ought to be used efficaciously. Among the different articulators, the tongue is the most active one that primarily helps one in speaking a language. Tongues that speak mother tongues must be twisted and twirled in the right manner to express English intelligibly. But English spoken in the border areas of Kanyakumari district is an amalgam of Tamil and Malayalam. Hence, an attempt is made to address the questions related to the phonological acquisition of Tamil speaking English medium students of the district, with special focus on lateral consonant and frictionless continuant. The study is constructed with the intention of unearthing the problems of pronunciation which would certainly help the students as well as the teachers of English. The findings of the study reveal that students face complexity in pronouncing the sounds. Hence, teachers who teach English should feel the taste of the language, use twisting and twirling tongues and help learners to achieve the same which is indeed the need of the hour.

Keywords: Speaking English, Kanyakumari District, Tamilnadu, Kerala, Lateral Consonant, Frictionless Continuant. Twisting, twirling tongues in pronunciation

Introduction

English pronunciation is an effective tool in communication. To communicate ideas with clarity to speakers of different tongues of different states a standard pattern of Received Pronunciation should be used. But pronunciation is given less priority in schools and colleges. And hence, unintelligible pronunciation is indeed an obstacle for many. To feel comfortable with one's speech while actively participating in social discussions or during a presentation on stage only standard pronunciation helps. This helps to avoid peculiar, awkward and worrisome situations. The persistence of such problems leads to an overwhelming demand for English and English medium schools. Realizing the graveness of the condition, it is high time that teachers of English train students in twisting and twirling the tongues that spin words with a savour of their respective mother tongues. As the new language is learned quite a long time after the mother tongue is acquired learners face numerous problems while pronouncing English words.

Considering intelligible pronunciation as the essential need of the hour this paper is done to unearth the problems that students acquire, and exhibit related to pronunciation. The study was conducted among students of CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) and SB (State Board) English medium schools to address the problems of students, if any, in pronunciation with special attention to the production accuracy of lateral consonants /l/ and frictionless continuant /r/, at the segmental level and its relationship to overall intelligibility among the students of CBSE and State Board schools.

Description of the Select Sounds

The two sounds selected for the study are /l/ and /r/. Alveolar lateral /l/ is a voiced sound. During the production of /l/, the tip of the tongue makes a firm contact with the alveolar ridge. There is complete closure along the centre of the oral tract. The soft palate is raised, and the sides of the tongue are lowered and air escapes along the sides of the tongue without any friction.

The frictionless continuant /r/ is also a voiced sound. During the articulation of the post-alveolar frictionless continuant /r/, the tip of the tongue is held in a position near to, but not touching, the rear part of the upper teeth ridge. The back rims of the tongue touch the upper molars and the central part of the tongue is lowered with a general contraction of the tongue. The air escapes freely without any friction.

Hypothesis of the Study

The means of the two populations namely, CBSE students and SB students in using the lateral consonants /l/ and frictionless continuant /r/, are the same.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to identify if students have intelligible pronunciation.

Methods and Materials

Ten high school students each learning English as their second language in various CBSE and SB schools in Kanyakumari district and whose mother tongue is Tamil were selected for the study. Students are in the age group of fourteen to fifteen years. The subjects were asked to read a passage which was recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. An informal interview was also conducted. The performance of the subjects was recorded for analysis. The phonology of the English words that were produced by the respondents was compared with the phonology of the same words in Received Pronunciation (RP). Different statistical tools are used for analyzing the data. In order to derive inference, hypothesis was tested to see whether the data were complying with the statements. Basic descriptive statistics were also used to understand data patterns. Cross-tabulation was used to compare the means of variables collated through different scale items. The tools like One-Sample T-Test and Independent Sample T-Test were used to infer the data collected.

Findings and Results

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Production Accuracy of Lateral /l/

The lateral sound with one phonological variation /l/, was examined to understand the production accuracy of the students (n=20). The production accuracy of lateral sound by CBSE and SB students was investigated for differences with equally sized groups using independent sample t-test. The null hypothesis is that the means of the two populations are the same, assuming that the production of lateral sound was similar and correct for both CBSE and SB students, i.e. $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ and the results are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Production Accuracy of Lateral

Sl. No.	Variable	Group	n	Mean	SD	T	df	p
1	Lateral	CBSE	10	5.36	0.485	11.23	264	0.00
		SB	10	4.82	0.443			

Source: Primary data

Note: The t and df were adjusted because variances were not equal.

The results in Table 1 indicate that CBSE students are significantly different from SB students in the production of lateral consonant (p=0.00). The analysis of the means of the two groups indicates that the average production accuracy score for SB students (4.82) is significantly lower than the CBSE students (5.36). It is alternatively inferred that CBSE students produced more correct responses of lateral sound ($\mu > 5$) and SB students produced more wrong responses of lateral sound ($\mu \leq 5$).

Production Accuracy of Frictionless Continuant /r/

The frictionless continuant /r/, with one phonological variation was analysed to understand the production accuracy of the students (n=20). The production accuracy of frictionless continuant by CBSE and SB students was investigated for differences with equally sized groups using independent sample t-test. The null hypothesis is that the means of the two populations are the same, assuming that the production of frictionless continuant was similar and correct for both CBSE and SB students, i.e. $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ and the results are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Production Accuracy of Frictionless Continuant

Sl. No.	Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
1	Frictionless Continuant	CBSE	10	4.28	0.482	-8.11	253	0.00
		SB	10	4.67	0.441			

Source: Primary data

Note: The t and df were adjusted because variances were not equal.

The results in Table 2 indicate that CBSE students are significantly different from SB students in the production of frictionless continuant (p=0.00). The analysis of the means of the two groups indicates that the average production accuracy score for CBSE students (4.28) is significantly lower than that for the SB students (4.67). However, the students of both CBSE and SB have wrong responses on frictionless continuant ($\mu \leq 5$). It is alternatively inferred that

SB students have less wrong responses in the production of frictionless continuant when compared to CBSE students, but both the groups of students produced wrong responses.

Discussion

The lateral sound /l/, tested using six words, where the sound occurs in different positions, was analysed in detail. In the initial position in *live* and *laughter* students from both groups who pronounced the words did not have any difficulty, but the students had reading aberration in *live*. Non-linguistic features were much higher while pronouncing *laughter*. The students were unfamiliar with the word and hence the word was produced non-linguistically, but the fact is that the sound /l/ is right while uttering the word. On the other hand, in word-medial and word-final position the retroflex lateral /ɭ/ interfered in the speech of the learners. This is because of the interference of the sound from the Tamil language. The wrong responses are:

clock /kɒk/ as /kɭɑ:k/, *called* /kɔ:ld/ as /kɑ:ldɨ/
table /teɪbl/ as /te:ɪɭ/, *school* /sku:l/ as /sku:ɭ/

The frictionless continuant /r/, tested using six words, where the sound occurs in different positions, was analysed in detail. The sound /r/ is often replaced by the closest sound of the mother tongue of the learners that is, either by the voiced alveolar flap /ɾ/ [u] which is “produced by a single flap of the tongue at the alveolar arch” (Schiffman 4) or by the voiced alveolar trill /r/ [w] which is “produced by rapid vibrations by the tip of the tongue against the middle of the alveolar ridge” (5). The wrong responses are:

room /ru:m/ as /ru:m/, *racket* /'rækt/ as /ræket/,
forever /fə'revər/ as /foreve/ *parents* /peərənts/ as /pe:ɾəns/,
reappear /ri:ə'piər/ as /ɾɪɾɪər/.

The study, thus, discloses the learning surface and filters the impediments that learners encounter on the way to excellence in performance. It is also found that students are not trained in Phonetics. Moreover, the allophonic structures are largely influenced by the phonology of Tamil. Certain words are neither English nor Tamil but a combination of both, thus forming a hybrid containing features of both the languages. The findings reveal that the pronunciation features are not emphasized and given importance in language classes. Learners can acquire such linguistic features only with intentional effort and conscious awareness of a teacher's guidance. According to Celce-Murcia, “a second language learner will have to produce and perceive some new sounds when acquiring a second language” (8).

Conclusion

Perceiving this phenomenon of learning new sounds, the students must mimic the sounds of the English language exactly. The teacher must show what to do with their tongue, lips and other organs of speech and to exercise them in the new positions and movements. To explain, and to show all this, the teacher must know how speech sounds are produced and he/she must be competent in Phonetics. Moreover, the learners of English should be helped to develop a positive attitude towards the importance of pronunciation that the habit of learning the sounds

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accurately is imbibed. According to Corder "... the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques...." (20). Therefore, speaking accurately is really a challenge to teaching and learning English pronunciation. Pronunciation features should be taught and learners' goals and motivations for improving their pronunciation must be encouraged. Recent implications derived from researches should be interlocked into the teaching practice, so that teachers can help learners gain the skills for effective communication in English. Unless teachers recognize and realize the taste of the language and the valuable taste of the present time, the students cannot be helped to twist and twirl their mother tongues.

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