

Action research on pronunciation errors and feedback

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Background to the study

The aim of the present research was to gain insight into the reasons and sources of the persistence and plethora of pronunciation errors, as well as the nature and types of the feedback on them in a Business English classroom.

At the beginning, it is essential to identify whether we are dealing with a problem worthwhile to consider. After all, business people are generally confident, fluent communicators, and actual business would never suffer if one of the partners pronounced /βΙζ∇νεσ/, for example. The reality is that 'the driving force for the non-native speakers is getting information across efficiently' (Jenkins, 1996:10). But what is the role of correct pronunciation in securing this efficiency? A brief literature review on the matter would help us see the picture.

There have been different approaches to the 'general neglect of teaching pronunciation in contemporary language pedagogy' (Wong, 1999:115). Bobda notes that 'among the innumerable deviations from native forms pronunciation exhibits the highest number of such deviations' (Bobda, 1991:31). Some scholars 'argue persuasively for the tolerance' of this state of things, justifying it with the scarcity of books dedicated to pronunciation or the limited help and guidance to find (Todd and Hancock, 1986; Pride, 1982). Nevertheless, J. Jenkins puts forward the teaching theory of the 'Common core', which limits the 'Common core' to the areas where pronunciation errors, mainly from L1 transfer should be eliminated, because 'they threaten intelligibility', all other deviations being regarded not as "errors" but as acceptable regional differences on a par with features of L1 English regional accents (Jenkins, 1996:10). Today scholars are unanimous on the issue of 'having intelligible speakers' (Wong, 1999:116), because 'listening comprehension breaks down not only when learners hear unfamiliar words but when they simply fail to recognize familiar words embedded in the stream of speech' (Vaughan-Rees, 2006:27). G. Eustace is

explicitly clear in his message: 'For many non-native speakers, accuracy may not be vitally important, but clarity of speech, to facilitate ease of understanding, certainly is'. So, 'there is a respectable argument for saying that teachers could be serving their business students best by adopting that approach' (Eustace, 2005:38).

Ellis and Johnson, while presenting the list of eight priorities of 'what the majority of business learners need to acquire,' include the entry of 'clear pronunciation and delivery' (Ellis & Johnson, 1996:35).

The demand to 'treat language learning holistically' equally refers to the inclusion of teaching pronunciation, as 'focusing on meaning does not require ignoring forms' (Borg, 2004:12). Paul Emmerson's theory of 'mutual intelligibility' specifies best the criteria to adhere to. He draws distinct boundaries of what is represented by 'fully intelligible international English'. It is identified as 'RP/GA Minus' with 'High-Frequency Lexis Plus' where 'RP/GA Minus' is any of individual's pronunciation where:

- words are spoken approximately as they are written in phonetic script in ELT dictionaries (RP or GA), but there is a slight accent according to the country of origin;
- there is use of tone units to create chunks of meaning and nuclear stress to make key words prominent;
- but there is not much use of assimilation/elision/weak forms' (Emmerson, 2006:3).

Thus, it is evident that the question of pronunciation errors and related feedback is one of the many facets of language teaching to tend to. Unfortunately, in the case of Armenian learners of English there are no records of related research. This is why several years ago I started to collect data for further examination.

Data collection

The presented action research had been conducted over a period of six semesters. The data was collected from the speech of university students studying Business English, as well as students preparing for BEC examinations with the age span of 17 to 50, and language proficiency levels ranging from lower intermediate to advanced. The research had been carried out in Yerevan State University and the International Accounting and Business Centre in Yerevan.

The data to study was recorded/transcribed mostly in class, with no intrusions on or interruptions to the free flow of students' speech, though, certainly with their consent.

Our initial attempts to ask the students to make their reports standing nearer to the tape-recorder, or to speak up to be recorded well, proved to be non-productive, as even the best students get frustrated from the awareness of being recorded openly and end up with unnatural, distinctly erroneous performance.

Research and findings

The data analysis has proved that it is sound and stress errors that often create significant barriers in the process of delivering intelligible speech. Accordingly, I have clustered these errors into several groups and subgroups.

The largest is the L1 influence group, with its special niche for the subgroup of international words, which the student knows through L1. The L1 influence or transfer is exposed in different ways.

The most numerous errors derive from the students' approach to read every single letter of the word, which, in fact, is an application of the Armenian or Russian (common language in Armenia) alphabetic reading mode. Words like 'debt', 'liable' or 'legal' are read as /Վճեթ/, /լիՎաբլ/ or /լեՎալ/.

The transfer of the end-of-word Armenian fixed stress onto the English words is quite common: e.g. /πρΞՎճուկ/, /βαρՎեր/, /βΙΖՎնես/, /%ճԻԹեՎլՕրոս/, /κΞրπ ΞՎրեԻ/, /πΞրՎտՏեԻ/.

The latter also affects the pronunciation of prefixes, with the effect of neglecting or minimizing their morphological meaning. For example, in the mispronounced word /րեԻՎՎթեսԻճ/ the sound /ε/ in the prefix instead of /r:/ along with one stress only deprive the prefix 're-' of its full meaning.

The L1 type reading mode particularly persists in the pronunciation of borrowed or international words, which have come into Armenian mainly via Russian: e.g. /ՎԻՇՕլեԻտիճ/ - 'isolated', /Վկլեյն/ - 'client', /ՎֆԻնէլ/ - 'final', /ՎֆԻրմ/ - 'firm', /ֆԻՎՎոնսԻՇ/ - 'finances'.

Examples of L1 dialect stress transfer are detectable as well: e.g. /մեՎմՕրΞՎճէմ/ for 'memorandum' reflects the stress of the north-western dialect of the Armenian language.

Another subgroup of L1- related errors involves the host of those borrowed words that have the sounds /kh/ and /tʃ/. Owing to the lack of these sounds in the English language, such words use /κ/ and /σ/ respectively. However, students tend to rely on their mother tongue variation of the borrowed words, which had successfully incorporated the original sounds of /κη/ and /տժ/. Thus, they are quite at ease with /Վֆառկի/ or /տեղիՎնԻկ/ or /ՎՏՕտսալ/ or /ՎքրՕտսե՛ս/.

In a similar, though reverse way, students ignore the sounds which are absent in the Armenian language. This particularly refers to the pronunciation of diphthongs and the sounds /ʃ/, /ω/, /T/ and /Δ/, which are read /α, ε/, /թ/, /ճ, ք/ and /Շ/ respectively (/ΞՎթեԻր/ - for /ΞՎωԵΞ/ - a 'w-v' and 'EΞ - εI' shift, /ՎոթΞՎնΞ/ for /ՎΞYՎնΞ/, /ՎաճՇ/ - for /Վ{ճՇ/, /ՎչճΞ/ for /ՎչΔΞ/, ετχ. The tendency is towards simplification of the pronunciation, which often results in one sound only.

The second large group covers the errors which are rooted in the students' prior knowledge of English. Having learnt some of the reading rules they assume that these rules should be applied consistently. Hence, if 'ea' is /u:/ in the word 'teacher,' then - 'greater' is /Վքրուէ/, 'threat' is /ՎԻրուէ/, or 'assume' is /ΞՎՏսւմ/ ֆոր on the analogy of 'assure', /βΞրՎրեԻՎնՆ/ for 'bargaining' ('gain'), /Վսերթալ/ for 'service', etc..

The next set of pronunciation errors reflects the overlapping of the pronunciation of derivatives. Students often relay the pronunciation of a certain word on to its derivative. For example 'significant' is pronounced /սաԻՎնԻֆԻկΞՎտ/ ('sign') or /քրԻՎֆΞրΞβլ/ for 'preferable' ('prefer').

The words 'economy', 'economic' and 'economist' are the most 'unlucky' group of the derivatives with Business English students. They are exceptionally rich in wrong pronunciation variants: e. g. /էկΞՎՎՕմ/, /էՎկՕնΞմկ/, /ՎէկՕնՕմկ/, /ԼէկΞՎՎՕմստ/, /ԼՎկՕնՕմկստ/.

Students also tend to stress that part of the word which is already familiar to them: e.g. /սΞրՎնլչսԻՇ/ 'surpluses' ('plus').

Some errors are related to the noun-verb stress shift. Mostly verb-stress is relayed on to the corresponding noun: for example, the nouns 'transfers' and 'project' are read as /տրΞՎՎնֆΞրՇ/ and /քրΞՎճէկ/, ετχ.

There are minor cases as well, that deserve attention: for example, wrong pronunciation of voiceless and voiced consonants (/T-Δ/ pair, when /T/ ԻՏ քրոսսնչեճ instead of /Δ/ - /ՕլՎՎՕY/ for 'although'); the pronunciation of 'qu', if not taught beforehand, is mostly read as /կֆս/ (դե լետեր 'u' is

treated separately), resulting in /IVκφουε̃λ/ - 'equally'; an interesting example is /κε̃νμΟν/ for 'common', which reflects the subliminal influence of everyday words from songs and films.

A decent number of errors is born from the students' urge to stylize words, make them 'user-friendly'. For example, 'transfers' is pronounced /τρανσφΙε̃ρσ/, 'executive' - /εκσφκφουτιβ/, 'organization' as /αργε̃νΙε̃ΙΣν/ (the distorted perception of the glottal stop /O/) ετχ.

Eventually, there are many other examples of pronunciation errors that do not fall under any of the groupings. They are mostly expressions of students' free, non-specified attitude towards the phenomenon of correct pronunciation itself.

The above-discussed list of pronunciation errors gives ample ground to assume that further research could

make it possible to, at least, outline the 'permissible borders' of pronunciation errors and specify the types that need greater attention during feedback activities. Meanwhile, let us look at the results of the action research on *the feedback* on pronunciation errors conducted in four groups at intermediate level, because feedback is the most consistent and efficient media to deal with them. In a Business English course correct pronunciation is mostly introduced in the general context and is followed up in the feedback along with other issues.

We consider the feedback on pronunciation errors a complex process of integration of supra-segmental factors and feedback techniques. However, for the sake of analysis, we have discussed them separately.

On a 1-10 scale (1- the lowest) the supra-segmental factors present/applied in the four groups observed line up in the following breakdown:

Table 1: Supra-segmental factors in the feedback

	activity description	group 1	group 2	group 3	group 4
1.	Developing awareness of the importance of having correct pronunciation	2	1	5	4
2.	Cultivating learners' motivation	0	0	4	2
3.	Timely feedback to prevent error fossilization	4	2	7	7
4.	Regularity and persistence of corrections	3	2	6	8
5.	Contextualized corrections	3	3	8	7
6.	Class atmosphere (general)	6	8	4	6
7.	Preventing negative or hostile reactions by constructive attitudes (politeness, encouragement, etc.)	4	3	4	7
8.	Teacher-student relationship built-up on a horizontal axis rather than dominant-vertical one	7	7	3	8
9.	Teacher's tension-free body language and voice projection	5	4	3	8
10.	Skillful conversion of personal feedback into a general one	2	1	2	6
11.	The silence factor: allowing the correction to sink in	0	1	2	4

Observations have also revealed that error corrections predominantly refer to stress amendments, as they pose greater impediment to the correct perception of speech (Vinarskaya, Michurina 1977:335). Little attention is paid

to faulty intonation, while the rhythm factor is completely disregarded. During the research the following feedback techniques were applied with different efficiency ratings:

Table 2: Feedback techniques in use

	activity description	score
1	pronunciation drills; repetition of the correct variant to enhance its acoustic acquisition and acoustic memory	6
2	extensive use of cards	4
3	frequent references to phonetic scripts	3
4	the use of capitals or bigger signs on the whiteboard to emphasize the vulnerable points	7
5	in case of error resistance, inviting students to concentrate on it:	6
	a. giving the student a while to draw in their minds the phonetic picture of the utterance by comparing the right and wrong variants, making associations, pinpointing the dissimilarities; b. 'Stop and think' technique: the flow of speech is interrupted the error - pointed out and the student is invited to fix the problem, suggest the correct variant	
6	drawing comparisons with L1	8
7	writing the phonetic sounding in L1, often explaining the differences in the two languages	9

Though most of the above-listed techniques work successfully with different students, as students' visual, acoustic, analytical, associative, memorizing abilities vary from person to person, points 6 and 7 of the feedback, where the L1 inclusion into the process is greater, have registered significantly greater positive results.

Conclusion

To conclude we may state that a substantial portion of pronunciation errors are L1 related. The second large group of errors indicates how differently the already acquired knowledge of English can influence the acquisition of the new language material in respect of pronunciation. And only a relatively small number of pronunciation errors bear the character of individual interpretations.

On the other hand, the feedback data analysis places the L1 factor as one of the best remedies for error correction and prevention.

All this could mean that while devising various pronunciation-teaching approaches, the factor of L1 cannot be neglected, but, on the contrary, should be put to the best use to create shortcuts and achieve better results.

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