

PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF STUDENTS AT LOCAL UNIVERSITIES IN UZBEKISTAN

Akhmadjonov Avazbek

Teacher of Foreign Language Department at Kokand University,
Kokand, Uzbekistan

Abstract

In this article, pronunciation issues with specific words and letter combinations in the English language were noted and potential solutions were offered for students learning English as a second or foreign language. Results are based on actual questionnaires and information provided by overseas researchers and university professors.

Key words: pronunciation, combination , consonant, vowel, subject, culture, intonation.

Introduction

For learners of a second language to sound like a native speaker or being able to pronounce words in a proper way is like a long term goal that needs years of practice. Problems in pronouncing different English words and how teachers solve those problems have been studied by a group of teachers and researchers in most countries, particularly in Uzbekistan, in recent years. It is important to know that, for most students, English may not be a second language and how their first language influences the second language they choose. This case study project analyzes the pronunciation problems of students at local universities in Uzbekistan and tries to answer the question of what kind of work can be done to improve students' performance.

Literature Review

Mispronunciation of certain words with a group of consonants

One of the combinations that have been mispronounced can be s and z combination which was mentioned in the studies of Mavlonova (2018) and Bakiyeva-

Rashidova (2020), university teachers from Termez, Uzbekistan. It has been observed that most learners (pupils, students) confuse this combination and pronounce some words wrong such as peas is pronounced as peace (Mavlonova, 2018). Mavlonova and Bakiyeva-Rashidova also studied some consonants that are written but not pronounced because they were either once pronounced or came from other languages (knock, know, psychology). Learners are believed to fail with pronunciation of these kinds of words because of the influence of their first language. In another study conducted by Temirova (2021) it is believed that pronunciation problems occur due to the difficulty of understanding stress, where and how to put it. Some students still failed after being taught and kept using wrong stress usage for reduced vowels. She also claims that, one of the unknown processes to learners can be the change in voiced and voiceless consonants, dependent on their position: at the end of a word a [v] sounds like a [f] or a [g] becomes a [k]. This kind of mistake often happens, despite the position of a consonant and Uzbek students still pronounce it as voiced (Temirova, 2021, p.1).

This raises the question why learners keep making mistakes even being taught how to approach them properly. Is it because of their interaction with non-native English speakers when learning English or other foreign languages? Another good point made by Temirova (2021) is that most subjects used Uzbek intonation during English speech. Because of Uzbek culture, some subjects were not able to pronounce the given words in their right form.

Bakiyeva-Rashidova claim based on the findings of Thomson, R.I. (2012) that, when asked, several teachers thought pronunciation problems were for students to solve and didn't pay enough attention to this issue (pp.224-233).

Comparison between excellent learners and poor learners of English

It is considered that, even if some advanced learners make mistakes in other fields of English besides pronunciation, they are probably appreciated based on their knowledge of English and provided with more positive feedback while students with poor pronunciation level are usually treated otherwise no matter how strong their grammar is (Bakiyeva-Rashidova, 2020, p.4). The idea of language learners being expected to perform like a native speaker supports the finding stated above, and when

someone speaks in another language, listeners mostly pay attention to the words being used and the accent of the speaker. Advanced learners mostly use unique words that listener may not know how to pronounce, while learners with poor learning skills apply common words that if pronounced wrong, easily catches one's attention. Another finding was revealed that good pronunciation users (GPU) who prefer listening to native speakers along with songs and movies to attain fluent pronunciation level. In the second place imitation and in the third place was repetition of words chosen by GPU. Other applied strategies were like talking to oneself and reading texts out loud used by learners. Good pronunciation users differ from poor ones with checking the pronunciation of words while poor learners feeling good about incorrect pronunciation.

Teachers' role in students' success with pronunciation

Bakiyeva-Rashidova (2020) thoroughly investigated possible reasons for students having low pronunciation results studying a group of teachers (45 local and foreign teachers of English) who participated in the questionnaire. They conducted an anonymous survey where participants were asked about structures and strategies they used during the lessons for students to understand and sound more like a native speaker. Simultaneously with the first survey they had another survey among learners about which group was a good match to teach them to learn and speak English. First survey showed that foreign educators had difficulties in working with local students as lack of teaching pedagogy, difficulty in understanding of learner's culture, not being able to explain abstract things due to not knowing students' first language. Second group of teachers also had difficulties in understanding English as it is not their first language, poor English proficiency and teacher behavior. The latter survey showed that most participants voted in favor of local teachers, when asked about which group is more likely to teach English pronunciation better, with 54% proponents (28 out of 45 participants) while the second group got 35% votes by the students. In her study, Bakiyeva-Rashidova claim that, inadequate education probably stops educators from being efficient in learning process (p.9). To perform at a native-like level, students need full support from their teachers, and undoubtedly, teachers must prevent any kinds of mispronunciation cases when teaching students.

Local and foreign teachers' opinions and views about pronunciation problems.

Bakiyeva-Rashidova prove their findings with evidences and providing local and foreign teachers' opinions, LT1: "Learners don't believe in Uzbek students' ability to teach pronunciation because they think Uzbek teachers' pronunciation isn't normal ...", LT2: "With Uzbek learners, the first difficulty is that Uzbek is so different from English so it's hard for them to imitate the way native speakers pronounce English sounds ...", LT3: "... students here have little chance of communicating with native speakers ...", FT1: " I believe that when talking Uzbek, an individual utilizes his or her mouth (tongue, neck, nose, teeth, lips) in a completely distinct manner than when talking English", FT2: "they give up soon... they don't exercise enough..." (pp.10-11). As it is clear from the shared views and opinions provided by Uzbek teachers and foreign teachers, to improve learners' pronunciation level they must keep contact with native speakers and teachers need to work on themselves to give only reliable and proved information to students related to speaking skills and pronunciation. One of the well-formed opinions of local teachers was: "due to the absence of a suitable English setting, the absence of knowledge of EP training, uninteresting methods of learning EP, and the education scheme as a whole, which gave little regard to EP", mentioned moments in this opinion show how little attention was paid to EP. Another prediction can be made based on the opinions above, Uzbek students try to imitate native speakers in a wrong way that causes words sound incorrect using their body parts. Teachers also believed that lack of motivation also plays a significant role in learning EP because they didn't consider it as an essential which caused misunderstanding of a given material, some even spent a few years and still couldn't succeed in learning English pronunciation or the language itself. When asked about solutions, most teachers supported the idea of spending more time on using English and practicing it is the best strategy to enhance students' skills while the other group believed that it is teachers who should improve their problem-solving and understanding abilities before they help students to cope with their problems on EP.

Three steps of pronouncing phonemes correctly

Final study that was initiated by Mavlonova, suggests three stages of correct pronouncing process of phonemes which can be one of the key factors for students to achieve another level of pronunciation. In the first step students learn to pronounce consonant and vowel combination sounds which Uzbek language doesn't share separately: consonants [r,w,f,v] and vowels [u, ou, ai, ue]. Next step is about pronouncing the words with voiced consonant at the end [b, d, g, v]. Finally, the last step is when students learn how to pronounce similar consonants which exist in both English and Uzbek languages in phrases [p, m, g, b, z, s, t, k, d] (Mavlonova, 2018, p.2). Some words may need further attention to pronounce them correctly while some may not. When teachers make a sound and students learn it, it is called "saying speech sounds" and doing so students listen carefully the content of the phrase and understand the meaning of new words.

Participant profile

As a subject of this case, a female 22-year-old learner was chosen, who studies at Pedagogical Institute and is learning English as a second language. The subject is married and mostly uses her first language to communicate, uses strategies of first language background to learn a second language and cultural views are also important for her to follow. Being a student of pedagogical institute, she prefers learning as much as possible about English language as a future teacher of English. The subject was introduced to English early in her school years which she found interesting and put much effort in this subject than others. She claims that she started learning English language because of the desire of becoming a diplomat who works with the representatives of foreign countries. In learning English language grammar, the role of her tutor was great that she became a student after passing English test rightfully. Methods like Grammar Translation, Community Language Learning were chosen to teach her by the tutor and focused on learning English grammar. The subject states that, she gets inspired by watching different videos about how successful learners talk about their language learning experience and tries to apply new strategies in her learning

process. To this day, the subject has worked for two years at school as a teacher of English of primary classes. She improves her English with the help of various internet channels, translating articles and using phrases or structures from them.

Research design

In this case study, to check participant's background knowledge and how the subject has changed after participating in this research, pre- and post-test design was used. Before starting the investigation process, the subject was approached and requested an approval for participating in the project. After getting an approval, the participant was introduced to the study tools and explained how this process could help improve her English pronunciation level. The subject was checked at the beginning of this research on how she pronounced a group of English words in given reading texts and what kind of mistakes she made.

The first step of this process was choosing appropriate reading texts which were given to the subject to read out loud. In the next step, the subject was tested with a set of questions based on the readings. The answers that the subject gave were recorded by the researcher and kept for further comparison. Results showed that despite having an authentic knowledge about English grammar, in the participant's pronunciation there were some detectable flaws that made her reading inaccurate. To improve the participant's pronunciation and solve the problems that she struggled with, the researcher used video tutorials about the pronunciation of English words that can be confusing and explained how certain words can be pronounced in British and American English. The subject claims that she has now much confidence in speaking and pronouncing rarely used words and various letter combinations that will be helpful in teaching English after she graduates from the university.

Data collection

The process of data collection can be seen in the figure below (fig.1).

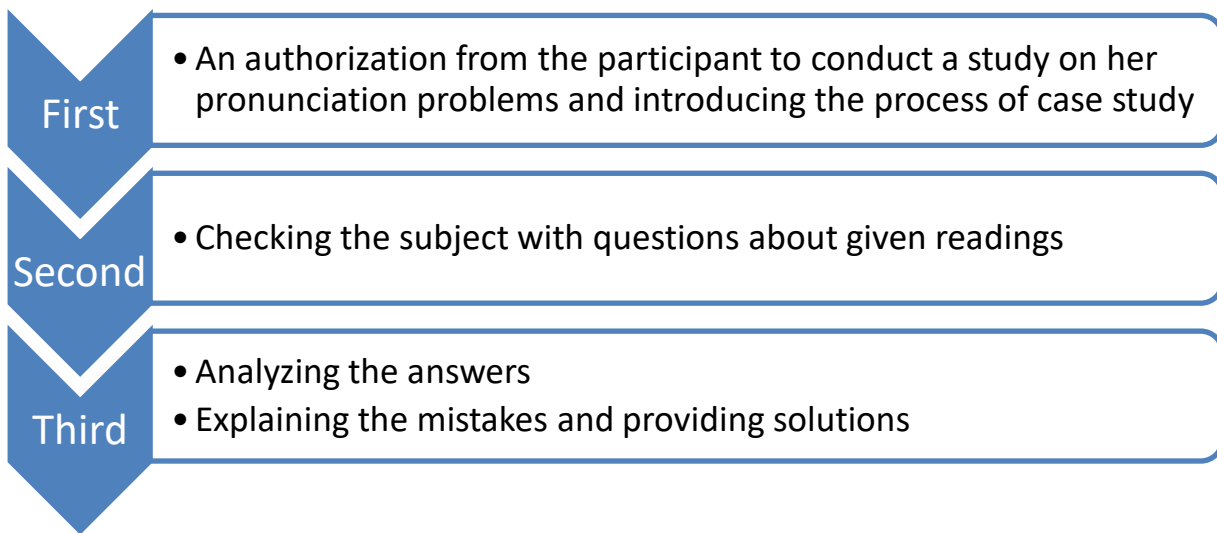


fig.1 Procedure of data collection process.

The goal of the case study were to identify what kind of problems students face with pronunciation, in the example of a student, who is learning English as a second language and to provide solutions about how to solve the problems that could occur in the process to improve performance level. The subject was given different reading texts, derived from reliable websites, she read them and highlighted which words were difficult or confusing to pronounce. The subject had difficulties with pronouncing words that start with the letter x, which is not common, words were: xerographic, xenial, xenodoch. TH combination was also considered as one of the confusing combinations because of its position and how different it can be pronounced at the beginning of the word: theory – /'θɪəri/ (sounds like theeuh-ree), theme – /θi:m/ (sounds like them); at the middle the word: rather – /,ɪɑ:'ðɜ:(ɪ)/ (sounds like raa-thuh), whether – /weðə/ (sounds like weh-thuh). Minimal pairs – words that sound almost the same and look similar, this kind of problem can confuse every student because in the pair of “ship and sheep” i and ee sounds are the only difference between these two words. To master pronunciation skills, the subject needs to learn and recognize the differences in this kind of word pair. The results of the

reading process can be seen in the diagram (fig.2) .

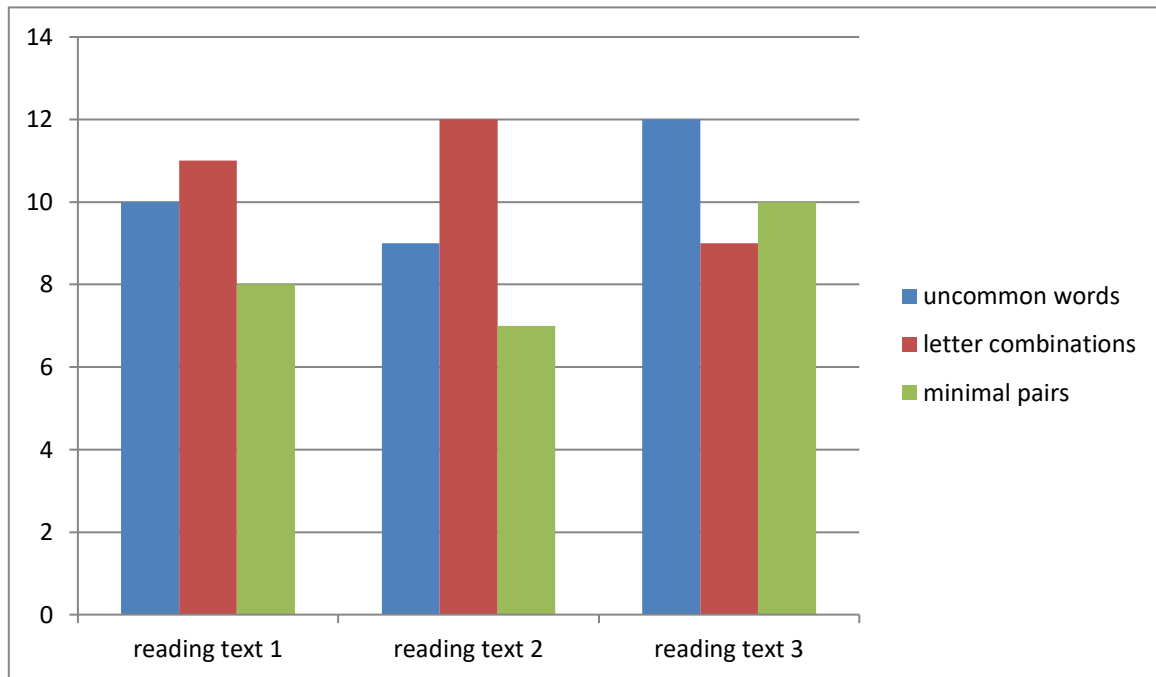


fig.2 The amount of words that were difficult to read (pronounce) in the texts.

As it is clear from the diagram, for the subject, it was more difficult to pronounce words that have specific letter combinations and uncommon words because of the influence of her first language. Most English words were new to the subject because of the dissimilarity between Uzbek and English languages. The last common issue was reading and pronouncing minimal pair words because of their similarity, the participant sometimes second-guessed herself on pronouncing them. During the study, the subject kept reading an article a day and watching videos about pronunciation with various instructions to improve her level. At the end of the period that was intended for the case study, the subject was given the same reading texts and tests to compare the results of pre- and post-tests. The effect of the research was promising, the subject learned from her mistakes and improved her pronunciation level. The results of the post-test are in the diagram below (fig.3).

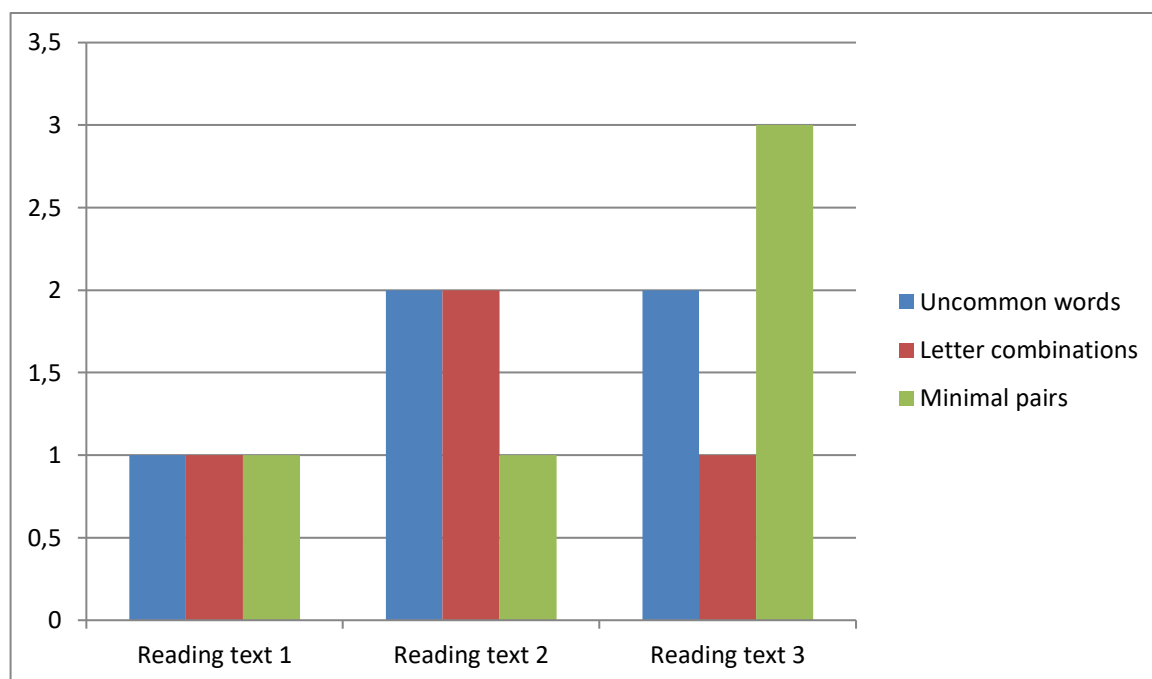


fig.3 . Post-test results.

Video files about pronunciation instructions helped the subject a lot that she could eliminate pronunciation problems which were fossilized during learning process. Explanations given by the researcher also put her in the right direction toward better pronunciation of English words and not to confuse them.

Conclusion

In her studies Usmonova (2020) mentions that “by the term “pronunciation” we may understand “the way or manner of uttering a word or words of a language” (p.39), this uttering sometimes creates problems for students and hinders them from sounding like a native speaker.

Based on the results and taking the subject’s opinion into consideration, it can be summarized that, reliable background knowledge about English Grammar isn’t enough for learners to reach higher pronunciation levels. Deficiency of practice on pronunciation at learning institutions and incompetence of some teachers cost students to perform at lower levels. Another reason why students find pronunciation exhausting is because of the influence of their culture that they feel insecure to start conversation with people whose first language is English. With communicative strategies and getting involved in speaking activities these barriers can be overcome. Lack of attention by teachers when students pronounce words wrong is the next reason that must be avoided.

Reviewed articles by other researchers showed how teacher's role is important in learning pronunciation and what kind of affects it may reflect on students' learning process.

In this short period of time, the subject could improve her pronunciation level, working on her mistakes and following the given instructions by the researcher. Both as a student and a teacher, the participant gained an essential experience that can serve in the future.

Further implications

Students can improve their pronunciation skills by watching movies, videos, TV shows in English with subtitles to see how words can be pronounced and intonations are put. Doing this, learners can also make their listening skills better, as listening is a part of improving pronunciation skills. Nowadays, students can use different types of internet websites and electronic software to check their pronunciation. Teachers can avoid these problems become fossilized if they pay proper attention and choose the best approach to every student in learning English pronunciation.

References

Bakiyeva, G. & Rashidova, A. (2020). Exploring English Pronunciation Teaching In Uzbekistan. International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research, 9(02), 1-13. <http://www.ijstr.org/final-print/feb2020/Exploring-English-Pronunciation-Teaching-In-Uzbekistan.pdf>

Mavlonova, G. (2018). Common pronunciation mistakes of Uzbek learners in speaking English. Euroasian Scientific Journal, 7, 1-4. <https://journalpro.ru/articles/common-pronunciation-mistakes-of-uzbek-learners-in-speaking-english/>

Temirova, H. (2021). Difficulties encountered by Uzbek students in learning pronunciation. International Journal of Discourse on Innovation, Integration and Education, 2(01), 1-2. <http://summusjournals.uz/index.php/ijdiie>

Thomson, R. I. (2012). ESL teachers' beliefs and practices in pronunciation teaching: Confidently right or confidently wrong. In Proceedings of the 4th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference (pp. 224-233);

Usmonova, L. (2020). The importance of teaching foreign language pronunciation. A Multidisciplinary Peer Reviewed Journal, 6(11), 39-41. <https://www.neliti.com/publications/335626/the-importance-of-teaching-foreign-language-pronunciation/>

Nolst, G.N. The chaos of English pronunciation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1edPxKqiptw/>.