

A Review of Literature: A Gender-based Study of Pronunciation Accuracy

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Abstract: This study as a review of related literature, aims to investigate the role of the gender on the pronunciation accuracy. We present a description of the pronunciation accuracy and the previous studies in this realm are reviewed and the effect of gender on it is noted. For nonnative speakers who intend to learn English language, the ability to speak fluently and to have pronunciation fluency is one of their necessities. It is interesting for researchers or others who participating in English language learning programs to know the differences between two genders in this field. The historical background of the researches in this realm shows no considerable difference between them except that producing accurate and clear consonants by females are more than males but it cannot confirm a complete superiority of females in pronunciation accuracy. So, according to these studies, there is no significant difference between learning in men and women and there is no need to design different programs for their language learning programs.

Keywords: Consonant introduction, gender, phonology, pronunciation accuracy, vowel

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is an important aspect of language and it needs special attention for both teachers who teach it and learners who try to learn it. It is one of the difficulties that students in the ESL programs and also in their communications in the real world face to it; because in all of them the sensation is how to say something in a foreign language. Maybe all of us had experienced that there is nothing worth than attempting to talk to a foreigner and looking to his or her puzzling face across of you that transfers a kind of misunderstanding.

Pronunciation teaching is a prominent factor in foreign language teaching. Since sounds play an important role in communication, foreign language teachers must attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation in their classes. However, this fact is very much neglected by many foreign language teachers.

An efficient executive secretary needs to devote special attention to communication skills and intelligible pronunciation is essential for communicating effectively (Andréia Schurt Rauber, Rosana Denise Koerich, "Accurate Pronunciation for Efficient Communication").

This study provides some background of pronunciation researches, emphasizes the prominence of pronunciation as a key for gaining full communicative competence and takes into account trendy views in pronunciation pedagogy like the effect of gender on it.

There are many researches in the field of pronunciation accuracy, but less in the investigation of

the effect of gender on the pronunciation accuracy. To do such this study we must be familiar with the definition of some concepts like: pronunciation, accuracy, proficiency, intelligibility, effect of gender in pronunciation and familiarities with different tools of measuring accuracy. This study is followed by a review of the findings reported in previous studies.

Here some of the past works in the area of pronunciation that are available in the literature were presented:

In a study by Yani-Komshian *et al.* (2001), according to transcription of data, they founded that their sample was able to pronounce some parts of speech better than the others, for example: They pronounce verbs more accurately than the nouns.

Major (1987), in his article complains the slow procedure of measuring pronunciation accuracy in comparison to different areas of language such as: grammar, reading, writing and listening comprehension; and he recommends several computerized techniques which measure pronunciation accuracy and he also mentions some advantages of these modern techniques.

And in a study by Font and Black (2001), they used a dictionary of proper names and results showed that including ethnic origin words in a statistical model can improve pronunciation results.

Levis (2005), describes ten different levels of proficiency in the United States: "Four of themselves (Advanced Mid, Advanced Low, Intermediate High and Novice Mid) do not mention pronunciation, while three others (Intermediate Mid and Low, Novice High) suggest that pronunciation may be

important as evidence of L1 influence and thus, it appears, lower levels of proficiency. Another level, Advanced High, mentions only precise vocabulary and intonation" (Levis, 2005)

In spite of the other past studies in the field of pronunciation accuracy, the objectives of this study are mainly about the role of gender on it, or in other words, to investigate the excellence of each gender on the other one in pronunciation accuracy. If there is any excellence, it is exactly in which of the elements of phonology, in vowels, consonants, diphthongs and so on?

Research questions: This study was designed to address the following specific questions:

- Does gender influence pronunciation accuracy significantly?
- Will female learners outperform male ones in pronunciation accuracy or the other way round?
- In what fields of pronunciation accuracy (vowels, consonants ...) male/female learners will do better?
- How can one obtain accurate pronunciation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since seventeenth century, the differences between the language of the men and the women were remarked by many scholars.

According to Bradley (1988), "linguistic variation associated exclusively with gender found today involves gender-preferential rather than gender-exclusive differences". It means that one gender may prefer to use a certain linguistic form more.

In investigating pronunciation accuracy, at first we must notice the definition of accuracy to measure it. Accuracy in pronunciation does not mean to pronounce like natives, but it is a subcategory of intelligibility and we can say that it is a kind of mastery in speech production. Another significance of accuracy is in EIL (English as an International Language), that it is related to distinct and fluent pronunciation of different consonants and vowels. Van den Doel (2007), in his article explains that an efficient EIL is the one that speakers attempt to make themselves understood to non-native and even native speakers.

A speech perception research by Trudgill (2005) that non-natives find it harder than natives to understand other speakers of English-especially non-native speech containing far less of the crucial phonological information. "Native speakers are better able to use contextual information, whereas non-native speakers of English find it tougher to process another speaker merging minimal pairs. When Dutch

businessmen talk about their earning their *celery* rather than their *salary*, this may be harder for Japanese non-natives than for Americans, whereas it's more difficult to deal with the confusion of *pork* and *fork* in Korean English (Trudgill, 2005) Nowadays there are many comments about the theories of teaching a foreign language's pronunciation according to different characteristics of learners.

Being extrovert or introvert are two noticeable features. The relationship between both extroversion and introversion and gender in pronunciation accuracy is examined by Hassan (2001) through an experimental research in Egypt and among the learners of secondary schools. In this study, it was found that:

- Extroversion and introversion positively correlated with English pronunciation accuracy among Arabic speaking Egyptian college students; as he also resulted in another study that it is more useful to use a combination of deductive and inductive approaches for teaching grammar to secondary school students.
- Male students outperformed female students in their performance of the pronunciation accuracy test.
- The extroverted students were more accurate in their English language, pronunciation than the introverted ones" (Hassan, 2001).

Maybe one of the most valuable reports in this regard is the findings of Simpson (2003). They in a study to find a number of articulatory parameters in production of tokens of a sample word (*light*), reached to some interesting results. This study was included of 22 male and 26 female. In this attempt they tried to investigate the relation between peak velocity, movement duration and diphthong duration. Finally, they analyzed downward tongue tip movement and diphthong slide according to the upward attempt to reduce the vowels and consonants, according to the results, males produced shorter sentences than women and women tried to understand speech segments more completely and they wanted to pronounce words more clearly.

So, one of the key clues for us to find better results in differences among genders can be the study of vowels and consonants and as a whole to study phonetics. Many scholars have some studies in this regard, for example: Scarcella and Oxford (1994) in their study: Second Language Pronunciation: State of the Art in Instruction, or an article by Yavas (2006): Factors Influencing the Voice Onset Time of English Long Lag Stops and Interlanguage Phonology.

In all languages, we have two major classifications of speech sounds: consonants and vowels.

Vowels are produced when there is an obstruction in the way of the flow of the air when it passes from the lungs up to the mouth. It is the main part of a syllable (obligatory), so it can be produced alone. Also there is a classification for vowels and it is according to the height of the tongue (high, mid, low) and different parts of the tongue (front, back, central) and shapes of the lips (spread, rounded, neutral) and muscles of vocal tract (tense and lax).

It seems that vowel quality features are different among different accents. According to Walker (2001): The length differences between vowels of English feature in all accents and the long English vowels are very long in comparison with average vowel length in other languages; because of this the distinction between long and short vowels is more important than exact vowel quality and should be clear in speech (English Teaching Professionals Journal). He also claims that for monolingual groups, the learners L1 is a vital tool in achieving pronunciation goals and the bilingual nonnative speakers, teacher is an ideal instructor.

In contrast with vowels, consonants are produced with an obstruction in articulators and as Celce-Murcia (2005) and Keshavarz (2006) and many other researchers addressed, there are some general features for them:

- Place of articulations
- Manner of articulation
- Voicing

In all the consonants, the phonetic and orthographic representation is not the same, such as: ch, th, ng, sion. Different languages have some differences in their consonants and it is natural that when a speaker of a specific language face with different consonants in another languages, then he/she cause serious confusions for his/her listeners.

Suter (1976) made a checklist and done a research on the influence of 20 variables that they believed are effective on the pronunciation accuracy of their sample. In this study, the most important variables were: mother tongue, sex, attitudes toward pronunciation, personality, natural ability and the amount of conversation among them and natives. According to their reports, only four variables were indeed true predictors of high level:

- Mother tongue
- Attitude towards pronunciation
- Conversation with native speakers
- Natural ability to imitate foreign sounds, stress and intonation patterns

Piske *et al.* (2001) tested Italian immigrants who had lived in Canada for many years. They divided their sample into four groups of participants who differed in the age of arrival and amount of continued Italian use (high-L1 use vs. low-L1 use). They reported: "As expected, the participants who arrived in late adolescence or early adulthood (late learners) had stronger foreign accents than those who arrived in childhood (early learners). In addition, both early and late learners who used Italian relatively often had stronger foreign accents in English than AOA-matched participants who used Italian seldom. The aim of the present study was to evaluate the effect of two additional variables that might affect L2 foreign accent but are typically confounded with AOA: Chronological age and the duration of L2 sentence. so, according to their study, there is a direct relationship between the age and the duration of second language sentences.

One of the first studies in this field is allocated to Byrd (1992). She found that by increasing in the rate of the speech, people tend to change their vowels of their speech into schwa and she realized that women do this more than men and she supposed that women use a different set of reduced vowels.

CONCLUSION

The literature shows that gender does not influence pronunciation accuracy of learners considerably and the pronunciation accuracy of vowels for both males and females is not of significant difference and are almost the same. Although, female outperform male subjects in producing accurate and clear consonants, but it is not significantly noticeable to result in complete superiority of female over male subjects. In addition, the most problems derive from the combination of both segmental and supra segmental, basically learners will usually have difficulty with sounds that don't exist in their L1. So, these slight differences are not evidence of different pedagogical programs for teaching pronunciation between men and women and people, even men or women can improve their pronunciation by practice.

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