

A STUDY ON MINIMAL PAIRS IN ENGLISH AND THE L1 BARGE AMONG THE AONAGAS

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Abstract:

It is a popular belief that L1 can interfere in the acquisition of L2. Ehrlich and Avery (2013) consider learners' first language as one of the sources of these difficulties. L1 barge most commonly affects pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and semantics. It is not enough to have good vocabulary but more important to have good pronunciation. One good strategy of learning pronunciation is teaching minimal pairs. Ao learners of English encounter difficulties in the production of minimal pairs in English. Though the difference in sound may be minimal yet it creates a huge difference in meaning. Sounds like 'pull' and 'bull' though it differs in only a single phoneme, the meaning implied has a huge difference. English phonemes like /p/ /t/ /k/ /b/ /d/ /g/ which are consonant sounds and also some vowel and diphthong sounds are commonly found to be problematic among the Ao Nagas.

The current study focuses on some pronunciation issues among Ao learners of English language particularly in regard to minimal pairs of consonant and vowel sounds that are unavailable in their first language. This paper will list these problems, discuss, explain and analyse them.

Keywords: *L1 barge, pronunciation, minimal pairs, phoneme, consonant, vowel.*

Introduction

“L1 is a speaker's first language and it is also known as mother tongue, first language and native language. The language which is acquired during early childhood starting before the age of 3 years is the first language”(Sinha et al. 2009). Acquisition of more than one language during early childhood is possible and this leads to simultaneous multilingualism. L2 or second language is typically an official language or societal language (e.g English) which is needed for education and other important purposes. It is learned after the first language (L1) or mother tongue. L1 barge in other words also means the mother tongue interference and this is the effect of the learner's mother tongue in the second/foreign language.

L1 barge simply means mother tongue Interference. Interference is the appearance of linguistic structures and structural elements of the mother tongue in the process of learning a second language.

The writer being an Ao has special interest in the Mother tongue Interference and L1 barge in the acquisition of English language. The present study is an ongoing project. It tries to summarize some of the problems that native speakers of the Ao language face in their attempt to use English language in particular minimal pairs in English.

It is important to understand the multilingual situation in Nagaland first in order to understand the status of English in the state. In Nagaland, there are 14 major tribes viz Angami, Ao, Sumi, Lotha, Rengma, Chakhesang, Khamniungan, Chang, Konyak, Phom, Sangtam, Yimjungru, Pochury, Zeliang and numerous sub-tribes (State Human Development Report, 2016). The multilingual composition of

Nagaland necessitates that each tribe speaks a distinct language. This has seen English declared as the sole official language in Nagaland. With the Naga statehood came the spread of rapid education. English became the language of the educated and the link language among the Nagas. In 1967, the Nagaland Assembly proclaimed English as the official language in Nagaland. Nagaland is in the North Eastern part of India bordering Myanmar.

Before we proceed further, it is important to look at two theories- Contrastive analysis theory and Language transfer theory. Contrastive analysis theory is based on the idea that the more difference between the learners' mother-tongue and the target language, the more difficulty the learner will face in acquiring these structures or items (Contrastive Analysis, 2015). Language transfer is another major process in L2 acquisition. There are two major types of transfer as given by Selinker (1983): positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the processes whereby L1 knowledge facilitates the acquisition of an L2. Negative transfer refers to the processes whereby L1 knowledge interferes with and thus negatively impacts L2 acquisition.

Why English?

English which is L2 in many countries is a language of necessity. English has been considered to be the first Global lingua. The fact that so many people now use English as either a first or second language, indicates that English is likely to remain a globally dominant language for many years to come. English is valued highly in the Naga society with a lot of prestige being attached to the language. A lot of time is invested in teaching English but most of the time language skills are not emphasized. As a result the learners do not develop this skill and hence lack confidence to interact in English.

This brings into focus areas of pronunciation which directly refers to production of speech sounds. Pronunciation is the most important aspect in learning English. Good communication requires good pronunciation. Pronunciation is the way in which a language or particular words pronounced or viewed is clearly understood by people (Gerald, 2000). Let me first explain some of the terminologies used and try to give reasons as to why I have used them here.

L1 barge- L1 barge simply means mother tongue interference also meaning the interruption of the child's first language in learning other languages in pronunciation and spelling. Interference is the appearance of linguistic structures and structural elements of the mother tongue in the process of learning a second language.

The concept of Minimal pairs

As stated by Bradley-Benett 2007 “Regardless of your instructional content, you are likely to encounter minimal pairs on a daily basis. A minimal pair consists of two words that almost sound the same, differing only by a single phoneme. Some argue that minimal pairs merits only minimal importance (Brown, Adam: 1995). But perhaps what Brown said is true “The phonemic difference might be minimal, but the communicative value is huge.” It is so important to realise that there is a difference in the sound even if it's a very small difference. This sound no matter how small it is when pronounced correctly will make all the difference.

It is not always easy to find out from the spelling whether two English words form a minimal pair or not. For example, the two English words *wonder* and *thunder* do form a minimal pair, though orthographically they look very different from each other. If we transcribe the two words phonemically, (/wʌndə/ and (θʌndə/) it immediately becomes apparent that these two words, in fact, constitute a minimal pair.

L1 barge in the acquisition of English sounds is very prominent among Ao speakers. English phonemes (/p/ /b/ /t/ /b/ /d/ /g/) which are consonant sounds are found to be problematic among the Ao speakers. Many Ao learners encounter certain difficulties in pronouncing these sounds. Voiced consonant sounds /b/ /d/ /g/ are not distinctly present in Ao language. Hence error in pronunciation like the one given

below can occur which leads to misinterpretation.

'Pack your backpack' will be heard in extreme cases as 'pig your pigpig'.

Phonemic transcription /pæk/ and /bæk/. This is a set of words which differ from each other in just one sound /p/ and /b/. In Ao there are no distinct voiced plosive sounds, so AoL1 learners find it not only difficult to produce the /p/ and /b/ sounds distinctly but also tends to use the voiced and voiceless sounds interchangeably.

The Minimal pairs of plosive sounds (both voiced and voiceless sounds) occur frequently in English such as:

/p/	/b/
Pit	bit
Pack	back
Bun	pun
Bull	pull
Bride	pride
Big	pig

Successful communication involves correct pronunciation. One has to keep in mind that it's not about spellings but it's all about the sounds. The places of articulation of the above sounds are bilabial and the manner of articulation is plosive. Some of the Ao learner of English would pronounce the above as:

There is a *pull* in the garden instead of a *bull*.

Here comes the *pride* instead of *bride*

Bun intended instead of *pun* intended

She's at the *beak* of her career instead of *peak*.

Minimal pairs /t/ and /d/

Tin	din
Town	down
Tense	dense
Dread	tread
Do	two

The above sounds can be heard as

The *tin* of many voices instead of *din*

Meet me in *down* instead of *town*

Tense fog instead of *dense* fog

I can *two* it instead of *do*.

Minimal pairs /k/ and /g/

Coat	goat
Cross	gross
Crew	grew
Court	goat

Above sounds can be heard as

Torn & tattered *goat* instead of *coat*

Keep your fingers *grossed* instead of *crossed*

I drink *court* milk instead of *goat*

From the above we can see how L1 barge happens at two levels. At one level we can see the voiceless plosives /p/ /t/ /k/ being substituted by the voiced plosive /b/ /d/ /g/. At another level both sounds are used interchangeably. This creates confusion in oral communication which leads to misinterpretation of meanings.

Another interesting feature to be noted is the frequent use of the front vowel /ʌ/ sound. In the speech sounds of some Ao learners the vowel sound /e/ and diphthong /eɪ/ is quickly replaced by /ʌ/ as shown below in minimal pairs:

Date - *debt* is heard as /dʌ/ and /dʌ/

Date - *net* is heard as /dʌ/ and /nʌ/

Date - *fate* is heard as /dʌ/ and /fʌ/

Ebb - *edge* is heard as /ɒ/ and /ʌ/

End - *and* is heard as /ɒnd/ and /nʌ/

Cat - *kit* is heard as /kʌ/ and /kʌ/

Discussion

It is quite common to have /ʌ/ sound substituting some vowel and diphthong sounds. The above is a prime example of such usage. Small variation in pronunciation as shown above is enough to create confusion and misinterpretation. This problem is almost becoming fossilized now even among the educated Ao's. Hence perhaps Wright's proposal that minimal pair strategy is suggested as one of the effective strategies (Wright 2000) is true in aspects of language learning.

Intelligibility is what a learner should aim at. In order to speak intelligibly, learning to articulate the smallest English sound is very important. The above discussion clearly demonstrates that the speaker will remain unintelligible so long as the errors committed in minimal pairs are left uncorrected. Reduced speech intelligibility leads to communication gap and misinterpretation of meaning implied. As a result substituting /p/ /t/ /k/ with /b/ /d/ /g/ and using just a single vowel /ʌ/ for other vowel and diphthong sounds will lead to decreased and poor communication. According to Kreidler, pronunciation is a terminology that correlated among speech and language. He noted "speech is an activity which is carried on in numerous events; language is knowledge, a code which is known and shared by people who use their knowledge for transmitting and interpreting messages in the events." Language is the vehicle for expression. Pronunciation renders language to be effective or ineffective. Therefore good pronunciation is the key to good communication.

Conclusion

The question which variety of English is to be learned comes uppermost in one's mind. One of the varieties of British English is called Received Pronunciation abbreviated as RP. RP English is certainly a good model for imitation. It should be remembered, however, that a vast majority of educated Nagas who speak English did not learn from an RP speaker or any native speaker of English for that matter. Learners in a classroom come from multilingual background and the teacher who teaches English comes from altogether a different language background. The result being, learners' ears are not trained to identify small differences in sounds. Learners were not taught English pronunciation in the way the subject English, writing skills and Arithmetic were taught in schools. Therefore, they pass high school and higher secondary without being able to speak English with good pronunciation and with confidence.

A good starting point to learn intelligible and good English should be the Minimal pairs. This study shows that the most fruitful way of acquiring the right pronunciation of a language is the minimal pair. One can conceal bad grammar, poor vocabulary but not bad pronunciation. Learning to produce the right consonant and vowel sound needs conscious effort and concentration. Hence it can be concluded that the teaching strategy of minimal pairs is an effective way that could solve to some extent the pronunciation problems among Ao learners. Therefore, Ao learners need to give more conscious effort in pronunciation in order to communicate appropriately and fluently. This alone will boost their confidence level for public speaking and also help them to acquire good communication skills.

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