

ENGLISH PHONOLOGICAL PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY ALBANIAN LEARNERS

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Abstract

To acquire command of a foreign language, the learner should learn the basic skills of that language, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. English can be difficult to learn because there are almost always exceptions to the "rules." For people of different cultures, some letters in English may be hard to pronounce as well. This can make the whole learning process more difficult. Correct pronunciation is a major key to language proficiency. Knowing the right vocabulary and when to use it simply is not enough. When you teach English as a second or foreign language, the primary goal is for students to communicate effectively. Pronunciation is basic to communication, and teachers should use the right exercises to familiarize students with sounds and structure of English language. English pronunciation errors are sometimes specific to speakers of a certain language. However, many pronunciation errors are made by English language learners from different countries. Also, it is important to be aware that what may be considered a pronunciation error in an English-speaking country may not be so in another country where the main language is English. Even within different regions of a country, pronunciation of the same word in English may be very different. The aim of this paper is to present some of the difficulties the Albanian learners usually face in learning the English pronunciation.

Keywords: Pronunciation, vowels, consonants, difficulties, stress, intonation

Introduction

Pronunciation is not an optional extra for the language learner, any more than grammar, vocabulary or any other aspect of language is. If a learner's general aim is to talk intelligibly to others in another language, a reasonable pronunciation is important. While learning the pronunciation of a foreign language, the learner often confronts different phonetic and phonological problems that obviously hinder his/her learning and ultimately prevent him/her from acquiring expected general proficiency in the oral and

auditory skills of the target language. This phenomenon is also evident in the learning of pronunciation of English as a foreign language (EFL) by the Albanian speaking learner. Phonological differences between foreign languages and English include differences in articulation, rhythm, and intonation. With respect to articulation, we determine which vowels and consonants do not exist in the first language and which ones are simply pronounced differently. Examining the vowels of English and Standard Albanian, we learn that English lacks the Albanian vowel phoneme [y] as in the Albanian word “ylli” Both as a learner and a teacher-researcher of EFL, I have had practical experience of and the opportunity to observe the difficulties that the Albanian speaking learner usually faces in learning English pronunciation. English is a non-phonetic language since there exists no one-to-one correspondence between the graphemes (the letters of the alphabet) and the sounds actually pronounced and perceived. Albanian is a phonetic language so the Albanian speaking EFL learners, especially the elementary ones try so hard to learn by heart the pronunciations of the words by looking at their spellings, so that sometimes they learn mispronunciations of many of them. for example: in the words “knee”, “know” they pronounce even the first phoneme [k] which should not be pronounced; they say [know] instead of [now]. From the phonetic and phonological standpoint, the Albanian speaking EFL learners usually face difficulties in, firstly, ‘speech production’ encompassing which articulator(s) to use how to pronounce which speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning and, secondly, in ‘speech perception’ including how to receive which speech sound(s) to perceive meaning. The difficulties certainly have seriously negative impact on their acquiring the speaking and listening skills of EFL. The aim of this paper is to identify the major phonetic and phonological problems confronted by the Albanian speaking EFL learners

Problems related to vowels and consonants

The English language has twelve monophthongs or pure vowels. They are classified into two main groups: long vowels (five long ones) and short vowels (seven ones). The Albanian language has got seven vowels: [i, u, a, e, ë, o, y]. They have got the same length. The Albanian speaking EFL learners, usually, find the long monophthongs of the English language difficult and problematic, for example, in the words “sheep” [ʃ i: p] and “ship” [ʃ i p], the Albanian learners confuse the long [i:] with the short [i] and this results in misunderstanding. The Albanian learners, also, find it difficult to make the difference between the open vowels and the close ones; for example they confuse the English [æ] with [e] which results in confusing singular with plural in the irregular nouns, for example “man” [mæn] and

“men” [men]. The English contrastive monophthongs sometimes cause substantial problems in the learners' articulation as well as perception of utterances because the difference between them is not that much exercised in the Albanian language. This is because, differently from the English language, vowel length in the Albanian language is neither a phonetic aspect, nor a phonological one. To emphasize an issue or express different attitudes and emotional effects, Albanian vowels are sometimes lengthened to some degree. Standard Albanian has got 27 consonants. The main division of the Albanian consonants is: voiced consonants and voiceless ones. Like the English language they are divided into: stops (sounds which are made by interfering with the airstream passing through the mouth by closing the oral passage), fricatives which are quite similar to the English consonants, affricates (which are formed by closing the air passage as for a stop and releasing it through a narrow space as for a fricative). In Albanian the apical affricates “c” and “x” (like English “ts” and “dz”, respectively) are not very frequent, but unlike their English counterparts, they may appear at the beginning of syllables as well as at the end. Another problem encountered by the Albanian learners is the pronunciation of the phoneme [w]. Neither the letter “w” nor the phoneme [w] exist in the alphabet of the Albanian language. It is rather difficult for the Albanian learners to distinguish the pronunciation of [w] from [u], they pronounce them almost in the same way. The Albanian linguists “are faced with the problem to find a solution for a new letter to be added to the Albanian alphabet.” (Lloshi, Xh. 2005, p.52)

Problems related to stress and intonation

Stress and intonation are two essential aspects of the pronunciation of English words and utterances since they perform phonological functions. Stress means prominence in pronunciation normally produced by four factors: ‘loudness’ of voice, ‘length’ of syllables, ‘pitch’ related to the frequency of vibration of the vocal folds as well as to low/high tone and ‘quality’ of vowels functioning individually or in combination. (Roach, P. 2000) English words in isolation or in connected speech naturally receive stress that eventually results in intonation carrying information over and above that which is expressed by the words in the utterance. Hence, English is a stress-timed language possessing a speech rhythm in which the stressed syllables recur at equal intervals of time. In general, in Albanian the main stress falls on the last word of a phrase, on the last stem of a compound word, and on the last syllable of a polysyllabic word. (Orthography, 1973) Although this holds for the vast majority of words in Albanian, some of them do not obey this general principle. English stress placement varies according to grammatical categories, for example, ‘abstract’, ‘conduct’, ‘contract’, ‘contrast’, ‘import’, ‘incline’, ‘insult’, ‘perfect’, ‘present’, ‘produce’, ‘rebel’,

and so forth as verbs receiving stress on the second syllables and as nouns on the first that's why the Albanian learners confront some problems in putting the word stress in the appropriate place. Moreover, the English language has got words with two stresses, primary and secondary stress. There are also compound words and phrasal verbs which have got two primary stresses for example, "arm-chair", "look after", etc. Words such as 'introduce', 'photographic', 'examination', 'excavation', 'responsibility', receive both primary and secondary stress and are difficult to be pronounced by the Albanian learners who are used to the Albanian words which have got only one word stress. In general the main stress in an Albanian stem falls on its last syllable, the main stress of an Albanian word (for compound words with more than one stem) falls on its last stem, and the main stress of an Albanian phrase falls on its last word. Unlike the Albanian language, the English language has strong and weak forms, such as articles (a, an the), pronouns (he, she, we, you, him, her, them, us), auxiliaries (do, does, am, is, are, have, has, had, can, shall, will), prepositions (to, of, from, for, at), and conjunctions (and, but), which are usually unstressed in connected speech. For example, 'the' is pronounced /ðə/ before consonants and /ði/ before vowels in connected speech if it is not stressed for some specific reasons. As the Albanian speaking learners are not accustomed to using such forms in their mother tongue, they find them problematic in both production and reception.

Problems related to rhythm

Before we discuss the English rhythm, we may have to explain what rhythm is. What is rhythm? In Dauer's *Accurate English* we can read: "When we speak naturally, words are parts of phrases and longer sentences. What we hear is a sequence of syllables in time, like notes in music. The time relationships among syllables make up the rhythm of language." (Dauer, 1993, p. 83) Rhythm, actually, is timing patterns among syllables. However, the timing patterns are not the same in all languages. There are, particularly, two opposite types of rhythm in languages: stress-timed and syllable-timed. Stress-timed rhythm is determined by stressed syllables, which occur at regular intervals of time, with an uneven and changing number of unstressed syllables between them; syllable-timed rhythm is based on the total number of syllables since each syllable takes approximately the same amount of time. English, with an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, is obviously stress-timed, while Albanian is a language with the prominence and strength on the penultimate or last syllables. These two languages, therefore, are very different in rhythm. Unfortunately, many Albanian students seem not to be aware of this striking difference. As a consequence, they tend to apply the rhythm of Albanian when speaking English. They do not even know that their English speech rhythm is affected

by the rhythm of Albanian, nor do they know that this improper rhythm makes their English speech unnatural and hard to be understood. In order to help students realize that English rhythm is so different from Albanian rhythm, we can use the following illustrations to show a contrast between the two rhythms.

English is beautiful (English) **Anglishtja është e bu-kur** (Albanian)
 Figuratively speaking, in the above illustrations, the English rhythm is composed of adults (stressed syllables) “**eng-, beau-**” and children (unstressed syllables), “**-lish, -ti,ful**” which suggests that English has different syllable length and weight; by contrast, the Albanian rhythm is composed of soldiers (each soldier represents a syllable), the last two soldiers, “**bu-kur**”, are the most important. Albanian has length and weight in the last syllables. Through the illustrations, it is easy for the students to perceive the difference between the English rhythm and the Albanian rhythm. English language is a rhythmical language. Each language has its own rhythm. In Albanian, every syllable is given almost equal time. In English, each unit of rhythm is made of a number of syllables, and the loudness of each syllable is affected by the number of syllables in the units of rhythm and by their relative importance. The vowel of “man”, for example, is longer than the same vowel in “manager”. and is even longer than the same sound in “serviceman”.

Problems related to the syllable division

Languages differ in the way they divide the stream of speech into syllables and in the structure or makeup of their syllables. Languages react in various ways when two or more of their speech sounds come together. Assimilation takes place if one of the sounds changes to become similar to its adjacent sound. Elision may occur when two or more sounds come together. Languages vary in the way they link together or separate words and phrases. Syllables in English are of two types: opened syllables which end in a long vowel or diphthong and closed syllables which end in consonants. The closed syllable is the most common spelling unit in English; it accounts for just under 50 percent of the syllables in running text. When the vowel of a syllable is short, the syllable will be closed off by one or more consonants. Therefore, if a closed syllable is connected to another syllable that begins with a consonant, two consonant letters will come between the syllables (**com-mon, but-ter**). If a syllable is open, it will end with a long vowel sound spelled with one vowel letter; there will be no consonant to close it and protect the vowel (**to-tal, ri-val, bi-ble, mo-tor**). Therefore, when syllables are combined, there will be no doubled consonant between an open syllable and one that follows. A few single-syllable words in English are also open syllables. They include **me, she, he** and **no, so, go**. A special kind of

syllables in English is that syllable which is formed with sonorants, for example: **peo-ple [pi:-pl]**. In Albanian language the syllables are mainly open syllables, i.e. the border is after the vowel, for example: **fsha-ti, qy-te-ti etc.**

Conclusion and suggestions

The above analysis, interpretation and exemplification have clearly revealed that the Albanian speaking EFL learner encounters diverse phonetic and phonological problems resulting from three basic causes. (a) the differences between the mother tongue and the target language, (b) mother tongue interference and (c) the faulty and inadequate teaching of EFL pronunciation. Therefore, we have to address and reduce these causes with a view to lessening the phonetic and phonological difficulties, on the one hand, and ensuring the smooth and optimal learning of EFL pronunciation on the other. The problems caused by the differences between the phonetic and phonological elements of the learner's mother tongue and those of the target language, MTI and/or the faulty and inadequate teaching of EFL pronunciation can be reduced and solved to a substantial extent by appropriately treating them in the teaching process that directly deals with varied linguistic aspects including the phonetic and phonological ones.

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