

The impact of teaching absent consonants on Iranian female intermediate EFL learners' pronunciation

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ABSTRACT: Teaching pronunciation to learners of English as a foreign language has always been a controversial issue. Some believe that it is useless to teach pronunciation in isolation and explicitly. Some others believe that the teacher's explicit explanation will certainly help the learners improve their pronunciation. The aim of this study was to investigate whether the instruction of pronouncing absent consonants of English in Persian would have an effect on female intermediate EFL learners' pronunciation. For this purpose 80 students from Iran Language Institute in Rasht participated in the study. In order to make them homogenized, an OPT test was given to them. 46 were assigned intermediate, and they were randomly assigned into two groups of 23 as an experimental and a control group. A pre-test of pronunciation (pronouncing 5 different words including the target sounds) was administered to both groups, and their voices were recorded. Then just the experimental group went under 20 sessions of treatment on pronunciation. After the treatment, again both groups sat for the same test, but this time as a post-test. All the recorded voices were evaluated using Rosetta Stone software. The results showed that there was a noticeable improvement in the pronunciation of participants in the experimental group, who received the treatment.

Key words: Absent Consonants; EFL learner; Intermediate; Pronunciation; Teaching pronunciation;

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language does not mean learning just the vocabulary and the grammar of that language .It means being able to communicate with the native speakers of that language and this ability will not be achieved unless the learners can understand and be understood.

In addition to structure and words of the foreign language, pronunciation and accent of that language will play an important part in making progress toward acquiring an L2.

Many researchers have put emphasis on the pronunciation of vowels and training it in order to improve the learners' accent, but little has been done about consonants and the importance of this area has almost been ignored.

This study focuses on just three different consonantal sounds that are totally absent in Farsi: /w/, / θ/ and / ð/. The researcher will train language learners to pronounce them correctly and will see the result to find if there is a progress in their accent.

Statement of the problem

Pronunciation of a foreign language is an area of the most importance and emphasis for both teachers and learners of that language . Among all languages, English is not an exception and the pronunciation of some English sounds may be hard for Iranian EFL learners.

English pronunciation has always been one of the most difficult language areas to acquire not only for the students but for English teachers as well. It is an area which is neglected in favor of reading and writing due to the fact that most testing is administered in these two areas and rarely in pronunciation is. Communication in any language is due to the interaction between listener and speaker. This needs the comprehension and production of the sound of a given language accurately. Lack of proper pronunciation can lead to ambiguities in conveying the message even if the speaker has competence in grammar and vocabulary.

It is also common that people are judged by their pronunciation. They may be considered to be well-educated, poor-educated, or incompetent. On the other hand, the learners who have good pronunciation are well understood even if they have insufficient grammar or vocabulary knowledge. Such poor pronunciation may make the learners avoid speaking or isolates them from interaction with others. They may lose job opportunities or further educational opportunities.

Celce- Murcia (1991) suggests that the learner's L1 is effective in the acquisition of L2 pronunciation. She believes that L1 transfer is more prevalent in the area of pronunciation than in grammar and lexicon. She goes on to suggest that "it is important for teachers to know something about the sound system of the language(s) that their learners speak in order to anticipate problems and understand the source of errors" (cited in Nazary, 2008:143).

The greater the differences between the target language and the native language are, the more acute the learning difficulties will be (Keshavarz,2012).

In the words of Lado (1957, p.2), The student who comes in contact with a foreign language finds features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

According to the saying above, pronunciation of sounds that are absent in Farsi may be the most problematic area for Iranian EFL learners.

The consonants that are totally absent in Farsi are /w/, / θ /, and / ð /, so most learners of English as a second or foreign language may automatically use substitute sounds for these sounds because these are not native to their first language. Iranian learners may use /v/ for /w/ and /t/, /s/, /d/ or /z/ for / θ /or / ð /.

/w/ is a sound you make on your lips. Your lips start in an o shape and then move outwards. Many of Iranian learners pronounce this sound as /v/, the closest sound to /w/ that is present in Persian. There are a lot of minimal pairs with /v/ and /w/ in English that if pronounced wrongly may lead to misunderstanding. For example veil vs. wail; vine vs. win; visor vs. wiser ; viper vs. wiper and many others.

There are actually two different sounds of /th/ in English. Both are made putting the tongue between the teeth, so that the tip of the tongue is touching the tips of the top teeth, and then blowing through the teeth.

Many Iranian EFL learners put their tongue behind their top teeth and make a /d/ or /z/ sound for one of /th/ sounds that is symbolized / ð /, or a /s/ or /t/ sound for the other sound of /th/ which is symbolized /θ/.

There are many minimal pairs with these sounds that can cause confusion and misunderstanding if pronounced wrongly. For instance, three vs. tree; tin vs. thin; think vs. sink; bat vs. bath, and many many others.

The sounds /w/ and /th/ are absent in Persian, which makes it difficult to acquire for Iranian learners. Poor pronunciation of these segments can project a foreign accent more in the Iranian' speaking.

It is necessary for the English teachers to have a comprehensive awareness of the phonological characteristics of first language and target language of the learners. Furthermore the teacher should have adequate expertise in teaching the problematic areas related to consonants, vowels, stress position and intonation to the learners. Teachers must be able to analyze utterances and break them up into their constituents and they must also be acquainted with the structural similarities and differences between the native language of the learners and the foreign language.

For these reasons pronunciation instruction is very important since it can guarantee a successful oral communication (Hismanoglu, 2006). Based on this assumption, it was decided in the present paper to investigate the effect of instruction of problematic English sounds on the students' pronunciation This research will try to find out whether training of these three sounds will have an effect on the English accent of Iranian EFL learners or not.

The statement of Research question and Hypothesis

This study will answer the following question:

RQ: Does teaching the pronunciation of absent English consonants have an effect on Iranian female intermediate EFL learners' pronunciation?

H0: Teaching the pronunciation of absent English consonants doesn't have an effect on Iranian female intermediate EFL learners' pronunciation.

METHODOLOGY

The design for this study is based on quantitative design methods and the type of the research is action research which tries to solve educational problems in particular classroom settings.

Pretest-posttest design was employed in this study, which means subjects were tested in existing groups. Both groups are measured before and after treatment. Only one group receives the treatment.

Subjects

The participants consisted of 80 adult students who enrolled in intermediate-level foreign language classes at Iran Language Institute in Rasht, Guilan. Age range of these students varied from 16 to 25, and they were all female and non-native speakers whose first language was Persian.

In spite of being assigned to intermediate-level in the institute, the students took an OPT test in order to be homogenized. 46 out of 80, who received scores between 40 and 50, were assigned intermediate according to the placement test. Half of these students were randomly assigned as the experimental group and the other half to the control group. Both groups sat for a pre-test, and then just the experimental group received the treatment on correct production and pronunciation of absent consonants of English in their L1. The other 23 students did not receive any instruction of this kind. After the period of the treatment both groups sat for the post-test.

Instruments

OPT test

The students who participated in this study were assigned as intermediate level students, but in order to make sure of the homogeneity of the selected groups, a test of OPT was administered. The Oxford Placement Test measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. It gives the information needed to find out about a person's language level. The results approved that there was little difference in the performance of the students.

Pre-test Post-test

After assigning the homogenized participants into experimental and control groups, both groups took a pre-test in which each of the students read 5 words selected from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English(2009) containing the target sounds and their voices were recorded.

After 20 sessions of the treatment for the experimental group, again both groups sat for the post-test which was the same test that had been used as the pre-test. This time their voices were recorded again.

Visual aids

The experimental group received the treatment in which the students in this group were asked to look at the some images and to keep the same position for their tongue and lips in order to produce the target sounds.

Rosetta Stone Software

The recorded voices were evaluated using a computer software called Rosetta Stone in order to measure the proximity of their pronunciation to the pronunciation of native speakers.

Rosetta Stone® is the world's most trusted language-learning software. Rosetta Stone is proprietary computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software published by Rosetta Stone Inc. The software uses images, text, sound, and video to teach words and grammar by spaced repetition, without translation. Rosetta Stone calls their approach Dynamic Immersion (a term which they have trademarked).

The company was founded in 1992 on the core beliefs that learning to speak a language should be a natural and instinctive process, and that interactive technology can activate the language immersion method powerfully for learners of any age. Since 2013, Rosetta Stone has expanded beyond language and deeper into education-technology with its acquisitions of Livemocha, Lexia Learning, Vivity Labs, and Tell Me More. Rosetta Stone is based in Arlington, VA, and has offices around the world.

Procedures

Step one: the first step was to homogenize a sample of intermediate female Iranian EFL learners. In order to do this, an OPT test was administrated to the students. The participants in the OPT test were 80 female learners, 46 of whom received a score between 40 and 50 on the test and were assigned to intermediate level.

Step two: the selected subjects were randomly assigned to two groups of 23 students as the experimental and control groups, and since this study was based on quasi-experimental design, a pretest was administrated to both groups before the application of instruction.

In the pre-test each of the students in both groups was asked to read five different words containing the target sounds of the study, /w/, / θ/, and / ð/, and her voice was recorded by the teacher and saved for the further evaluation.

Step three: the control group went under the usual instruction of ILI, in which they were learning English as a foreign language. The experimental group, in addition to the usual instruction in the institute, received 20 sessions of treatment, each lasting for 10 minutes and twice a week, on how to pronounce /w/, / θ/, and / ð/ correctly. In the process of the treatment, they listened to some native speakers pronounce the target sounds, they repeated the sounds, words, and phrases containing the target sounds after the teacher or the native speaker on CD, trying to keep the same position of the lips and tongue as they had seen in the photos.

Step four: after the treatment, the same test that was used as the pre-test was administrated to both groups, but this time as the post-test. Again the voices were recorded by the teacher.

Step five: the recorded voices both in the pre-test and in the post-test were evaluated by the computer software Rosetta Stone, that gives a percentage of the proximity of the users pronunciation to the native pronunciation. The results were adjusted by the teacher and for each student two scores out of 20 were considered. One for the pre-test and one for the post-test.

Step six: the results were compared using the SPSS software in order to find the effectiveness of the treatment on the pronunciation of absent consonants in Farsi to Iranian EFL learners.

Data analysis

Data gathered from the administration of the pronunciation test were summarized though running descriptive statistics and measures of central tendency along with measures of dispersion were computed. Moreover, the reliability of the pronunciation test employed in the study was approximated through a pilot study on 15 EFL students. Besides, inferential statistics namely independent samples T-tests and paired samples t-tests were run to the results of the both groups in pre and posttest. The parametric Independent samples t-test was run in order to find out if there was any significant difference between the control and experimental groups in terms of their initial performance on pronunciation test as well as at the end of the study. Moreover, paired samples T-test was run to show the possible progress of the two groups from pretest to the posttest..

RESULT

Findings

The findings showed that there was a significant difference in scores for experimental group and control groups $t = -3.2$, sig (.002) $<.05$). This result implied that teaching the pronunciation of absent English consonants for the experimental group has been effective in helping the language learners in the experimental group perform better in the pronunciation test. Practicing the pronunciation of absent English consonants improved the pronunciation ability of the participants in the experimental group.

Data Analysis

An independent samples t-test showed that there was no significant difference for experimental group ($X = 13.39$, $SD = 1.72$) and control group ($X = 13.26$, $SD = 1.35$; $t = -.28$, $p = .77 >.05$). This implies that the performance of the experimental and control group on the pronunciation test did not differ significantly in the pretest.

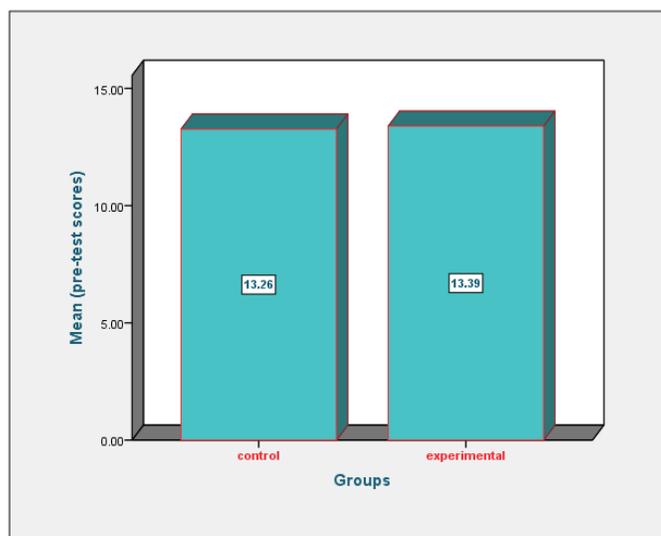


Figure1.

The Comparison between the Two Groups on Pronunciation Test at the beginning of The Study

In order to investigate students' progress within groups, paired t-tests were run, which showed the subjects' possible progress in pre-test and post-test that are shown in the following table.

Table1. Paired Samples Statistics for the pronunciation test scores

| Paired Samples Statistics | | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|----|----------------|-----------------|
| Pair 1 | Control group pretest | 13.2609 | 23 | 1.35571 | .28268 |
| | Control group posttest | 13.7391 | 23 | 1.51410 | .31571 |
| Pair 2 | Experimental group pretest | 13.3913 | 23 | 1.72519 | .35973 |
| | Experimental group posttest | 15.3043 | 23 | 1.76930 | .36893 |

The mean score of the experimental group for pronunciation test has improved from (13.39) in pre-test to (15.30) in post- test; that of the control group has changed from (13.26) in pre-test to (13.73) in post-test.

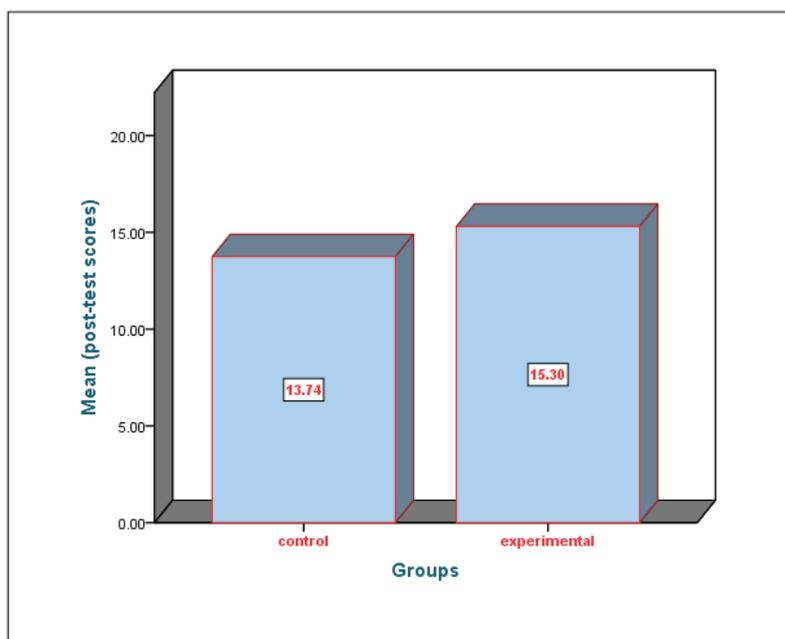


Figure2. The Comparison between the Two Groups on Final pronunciation Test at the End of The Study

DISCUSSION

As depicted in the tables above both control and experimental groups had progressed in the post-tests of pronunciation test. Based on the results of paired samples T-tests, this progress was statistically significant simply for the experimental group in but not for the control group ($P_{\text{experimental group}} (.000) < 0.05$, $P_{\text{control group}} (.077) \geq 0.05$). In other words, the experimental group made a noticeably higher advance as compared to the control group in the post- pronunciation test.

Hypothesis Analysis

As mentioned earlier, there was a noticeable improvement in the performance of participants in the experimental group, who went under the treatment. As a result, the null hypothesis that teaching the pronunciation of absent English consonants for the experimental group does not have any effect on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' pronunciation performance was rejected.

Suggestions for further research

Pronunciation has always been too difficult to teach and even more difficult to test. For this reason many of the textbooks do not include this important subskill of English and many teachers do not include it in their lesson plan due to the fact that they themselves are not competent in it. Not only don't they know any good approach to

teach it, but also they don't know how to test it. These reasons may make researchers reluctant to conduct studies on this important subskill. Further research on teaching and testing pronunciation can include the following:

It is suggested that in addition to the sounds that are taught in this study, other sounds including /r/ and // that are not totally absent but have different pronunciations in Farsi be taught to the learners and the result be compared with the findings of other studies.

It is suggested that pronunciation be taught through media in which learners can watch movies and hear the native accent. Then the results can be compared with studies using different approaches.

Also, studies can be conducted on the difference between male and female learners in pronunciation before and after the instruction of any kind.

Furthermore, the same study can be conducted on learners at other levels such as elementary levels or even advanced levels.

CONCLUSION

In the present approach to teach a foreign language, Communicative Approach, pronunciation is one of the most important areas to teach since the purpose of teaching a language is to make the learners prepared to communicate effectively.

For this reason, since CA took hold, scholars and teachers have always tried to discover some easy and efficient ways to teach pronunciation. Some have put emphasis on teaching sounds in isolation like Jalal Ahmad (2011) and Marta Nowacka (2012) who tried to investigate the learners' difficulties. Some others such as Celce-Murcia(1987), Gilbert(1984), and Morley (1991) believe that if a given non-native speaker's pronunciation falls below the threshold level, he or she will not be able to communicate orally no matter how good his or her control of English grammar and vocabulary might be, so they have tried to teach pronunciation in integration with other skills specially oral skills, listening and speaking.

There have also been some researches on the instruction of suprasegmental features such as intonation and stress patterns in order to improve the learners' pronunciation. A few of these studies might have been successful in getting the desired result but of course with a lot of difficulties and limitations while teaching the suprasegmental features.

There have been few researches on teaching the pronunciation of absent consonants to language learners, and since it's an easy, fast, and efficient approach to improve the learners' pronunciation and consequently their ability in communication, as the results of this study indicate, this approach can come in handy in language classes both in schools and in institutes specially in EFL settings where there is little or no contact with native speakers of English.

In conclusion, even in countries like Iran where there is no opportunity for students to have contact with native speakers of English in order to improve their pronunciation, there are quick, simple, and efficient ways to teach pronunciation, and as the results of this present study indicate, the participants in the experimental group who received the instruction showed noticeable improvement

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