THE IMPACT OF SOUND DRILL MATERIALS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE SPEAKERS LEARNING ENGLISH

L'IMPACT D'UN MATÉRIEL DE PRATIQUE SONORE SUR LA PERFORMANCE DES APPRENANTS DE L'ANGLAIS, LANGUE SECONDE

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Abstract

Language experts are in agreement that learning a second language like English, involves a complex system of sounds, vocabulary, syntax, and meaning demanding high level of cognition, analysis and processing on the part of the learner. One of the problems that students encounter in learning English as a second language is understanding the language when spoken which is attributed to the learner’s failure to fully recognize the sounds of the language. Familiarization with the speech sounds different from those of the learners’ native language and insuring their correct use are complex tasks that learning interventions and carefully chosen materials are of paramount consideration. The current descriptive study sought to examine the impact of sound drill materials on the performance of native language speakers learning English after a needs analysis oral test on enunciation of vowels and diphthongs, articulation of consonants and word stress. The prepared materials focused on addressing the difficulties of students in consonantal, vocalic, and diphthongal sounds of English were used by a selected group. The results showed marked improvement of students’ pronunciation skills usually difficult for native speakers learning English.

Key- Words: Oral Proficiency, Sound Drills, Foreign Language Acquisition, Language Macro Skills, Locally developed and Culturally Relevant materials

Introduction

The major systems that make up the broad comprehensive system of language itself are four in number: lexicon, grammar, semantics, and phonology. The phonological system of a language is what allows the speaker of that language to transform a grammatical unit embodying a meaning into a flow of uttered sounds that can be heard and interpreted (accurately, if all goes well) by another speaker of the language (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition). In the Philippines, English is regarded as a second language. Filipinos basically learn English in schools. The four macro skills are taught in Communication Arts courses from primary up to tertiary levels. Hence, a lot is expected of them in terms of language mastery especially in speaking as it is regarded as a basic skill pivotal when seeking a job locally and beyond. In fact, language experts claim that oral communication is one of the basic skills which all humans must acquire before learning can be asserted (Canonigo, 2003).

People come to know us largely by the way we talk. A stranger step into our midst and one word from him tells us something about him. Lee Travis, a prominent speech pathologist, once wrote: “Speech is reflection of the personality of the speaker. With every utterance, the speaker gives himself away. His speech is microscope directed towards his own inner self. Through which others may get the most intimate glimpses.” Whether we like it or not, we cannot escape the fact that we do make impressions favorable or unfavorable, on our listener, both in private conversation and before groups. When we talk, our beliefs, mental attitudes, emotional balance, sense of justice, educational background – the countless attributes that form an impression of our total character and personality – are reflected in the listener’s mind. No wonder Senaca the Elder of ancient Rome remarked, “As a man speaks, so he is.” Whether this speech created impression or not, it isn’t an issue at all. The point is that the impression is made. (Guzman, 2004; Lising, 2005)
In the field of language education however, teachers continue to be frustrated by the inability of their students to speak the way the native speakers of the target language do. Studies of Strickland (1981) and De la Cruz (2005) discussed that indeed learning to speak English is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning among second language speakers. Their studies further stressed that in speaking a foreign language many students feel themselves to be failures, since only relatively few exceptional individuals achieve this ability to have considerations in which they produce exclusively correct and complete forms. In their desire to help both teachers of English and the poor natives struggling to learn a second language, scholars in language and curriculum have painstakingly investigated of numerous factors that impede second or foreign language learning. Oral proficiency in particular lured their attention. The basic question on how one learns a second language triggered to the development of syllabi, the writing of lesson plans and production of instructional materials anchored on various theories on second language acquisition (Lightbrown and Spada, 1999; Nepomuceno, 2009).

As pointed out by Veloro (1986), teaching students how to pronounce a foreign language involves teaching how to produce the sounds of the language. This process is two-fold in nature; first aural or listening activities in recognition of sound, and second the production of sound through repetition and practice. Guzman (2004) and Canonigo (2003) on the other hand emphasized the fact that the sounds of the language are of prime importance. It is said that the first step in learning a second language is to familiarize the family of sounds of the target language. Familiarization with the new speech sounds so different from the learners own, and insuring their correct use is a difficult task. It is through correct and systematic practice, repetition, and exposure of the student to good speech models that the student will eventually become familiar with the sounds and rhythm of the language. Since pronunciation is an oral activity, the progress of a student in the correct production of the sounds is in direct proportion to the amount of systematic and actual practice.

This study is anchored on the theory of behaviorism, a school of thought which argues that “language learning is the result of imitation, practice, feedback on success and habit formation. Behaviorism is not only true to language learning, it is likewise utilized in the fields of mathematics, sciences, music among others. B.F. Skinner’s Operant Conditioning model which is widely accepted in academe claims that learning is controlled by consequences which when it is rewarding tendency is for it to be forgotten. Applied to language, learning and teaching, behaviorism involves the use of drills and exercises that aim to make the learners develop a habit. Reinforcement is done through rewards while errors are controlled by negative consequences. Learners receive linguistic inputs from speaker in their environment and they form “association” between words and events. These associations become stronger as experiences are repeated. Learners receive encouragement to their correct imitations and corrective feedback on their errors” (Nepomuceno, 2009).

**The First Language**

Language is inherent to a country. The Philippines, an archipelago situated in the South East Asia, is one of the countries in the region and perhaps in the globe abounds with rich language diversity. It has eight major languages with 162 indigenous languages spoken all over the country. Authorities agree on the eight indigenous languages designated as major regional languages because they are spoken natively by eight largest groups with Tagalog considered the largest group as having the highest number of speakers, followed by Cebuano, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, Bikol, Waray, Pampango and Pangasinensis. A major language can be classified as standardized, vernacular, pidgins, creoles and classical languages. In the Philippines, both Filipino and English languages are standardized, thus; other languages such as Waray are classified as vernaculars or lingua franca (Magdua, 2005). Waray is the lingua franca of the Waray-Waray, the natives of Leyte (pronounced as “LAY- tee”) a province of the Philippines located in the Eastern Visayas region. The natives of this region are the subject of this study. The researcher, a native and a teacher to the natives, curiously wants to know why the latter learning English hardly articulate English words the way they should be articulated. As such, an empirical - based answer attuned on this query was sought that paved way to a study grounded on tracing the problems that native learners (Waray-Waray) of English Language encounter. Moreover, it specifically wants to examine the impact of locally developed and culturally relevant sound drill materials on the performance of native language speakers learning English as Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) posited that the most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.

Lado explains that…
In learning the sound system of a foreign language one finds sounds that are physically similar to those of the native language that structure similarly to them, and that are similarly distributed. Learning of such phonemes occurs by simple transfer without difficulty. On the other hand, one also finds sounds that are not part of the sound system of the native language, that structure differently, or that are differently distributed. Learning of these occurs more slowly, and difficulty with them is more persistent. In fact, learning of the latter actually means learning the sounds of the language. He reiterated that when learning a foreign language we tend to transfer our entire native language system in the process. We tend to transfer to that language our phonemes and their variants, our stress and rhythm patterns, our transitions, our intonation patterns and their interaction with other phonemes. Thus we can understand the widely observed fact that pronunciation of a German speaker learning English is quite noticeably different from that of a Spanish speaker learning English. The individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture- both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and culture as practiced by the natives. As such, If a teacher is professionally trained, however, He should be able to see whether the book presents the language and culture patterns that form the system to be studied, and does not merely list disparate items from here and there. He should be able to discern whether the book gives emphasis to those patterns that are difficult because they are different from those of the native language of the students.”

When alluded to second language acquisition, two categorical conclusions can be safely drawn from the above statements: sounds recognition of the target foreign language and locally developed and culturally relevant materials play pivotal role towards effective or sound second language acquisition. These conclusions can be attested by studies conducted both by foreign and local researchers. Knippenberg’s study for example as cited by Magdua (2005) which basically concerns on the acquisition of a foreign language closely associated to the learner’s native language is a vivid example. The study analyzed written errors made by German 16-year-old learning Dutch. It was found out that mother- tongue interference abounded, and these are compared with those typically made by long- term German residents in Holland who have not formally learnt Dutch. It is concluded that three categories of mistake were shown up in the survey: definite language interference mistakes, definite target language overgeneralization mistakes and those which are a mixture of the two. Language interference is claimed to come most mistakes and at a level beyond the elementary, similarities in language actually do hinder language. The study suggested that courses should allow early success in aware understanding and foreign language speaking and should target interference mistakes at a later stage with appropriate drills (Magdua, 2005).

The dynamic interaction between authenticity and relevancy is noted by Jordan (1997) as cited by Manguerra (2006) and he stresses that authenticity and relevancy in language teaching is to reproduce the real world the input, task, and event in the learner experience. Correspondingly, the tasks must reflect the structural characteristics of the learners’ special purpose, thereby, to decide what is strictly relevant and necessary, one has to gather awareness on the why, whose, who, what, how, when, and where of the course design. He adds that one of the main virtues required of material writers is its ability to find authentic text that will fit pedagogic needs. Mc Donough (2003) emphasized that the, designer of instructional materials in language learning should make certain assumptions about the nature of the language as well as the process of learning and teaching. Moreover, he said the designers should take these assumptions about the nature of the language as well as the process of learning and teaching. Moreover, he said that the designer should take assumptions as the foundation for which to build the desired instructional text. Hall (1985) as cited by Manguerra (2006) gave his view on planning language teaching materials. According to him, before planning and writing for language teaching, there is one crucial question we need to ask ourselves: How do we think people learn language? Some think that we learn language by studying and internalizing rules, others think that we learn by stimulating real situation, negotiating, by learning and doing things we can understand, by translating and not translating, by being instructed, by discovery and a lot more. No one really knows how we learn certain language. It is thus our own view of how we learn language that we do in planning and writing our own materials.

Local studies on the other hand that dealt with the problems encountered in phonology and have the aim of producing speech improvement materials proved to be effective. De la Cruz’s study in 2005 for instance concluded that oral communication skills and competencies of the freshmen college students of the University of Perpetual Help significantly increased after they were exposed to instructional materials tailored to their needs. In the same year, Lising conducted a research geared towards coming up of speech improvement materials for the Evangelical College Freshmen at New Era University. The researcher determined the phonological difficulties encountered by the freshmen students of the university and then suggested materials that would ease their difficulty of learning the identified sounds of the English language. He concluded that the learners performance dramatically augmented. As
observed likewise, in this study, the natives’ peculiar accent and pronunciation, the tightness and tenseness of voice are evident when speaking English which leads to discrimination and name calling. Moreover, a number of natives seeking for greener pasture and educational advancement outside the region encounter disdainful remarks because they speak fast and laconically making them the perfect subject for contemptuous laughter; thus, destabilize self-esteem. This pronunciation dilemma of the natives appalled the researcher so much as its adverse effects rippled down to their personal, social, and academic struggles that a study addressing this phenomenon is apparent.

Since sounds recognition of the target foreign language and locally developed and culturally relevant materials are pivotal towards effective or sound second language acquisition as asserted by Lado and as concluded by various researchers who conducted parallel studies, it is therefore imperative to bridge the pronunciation gap by designing appropriate, locally developed and culturally relevant supplementary materials (sound drills). It cannot be denied that there are number of books and similar references that offer remedies to pronunciation difficulties of second language learners of English; however, there has never been one that can be categorically classified as needs-specific which means the one that addresses the speech production difficulty of a specific group such as the Waray-Waray. The researcher is strongly convinced of the fact that this phenomenon is trivial, neglected and is not given focus in the entire Philippines educational thrust. Henceforth, the need to develop locally and culturally relevant sound drill materials to bridge the pronunciation gap of the natives learning the language is ultimately of paramount importance.

**Methodology**

Developing such materials entails the utilization of the descriptive analysis approach. It is a fact- finding research wherein facts were taken through actual observation and which have been gathered on the basis of the objectives and assumptions of the study. It is said that production of instructional materials surmounts because of the existence of target clientele; it is necessary and it has potential for development of healthy self-concepts. As such, a careful identification of the subjects that could be categorized as target beneficiaries of the proposed sound drills instructional package was observed; an assessment of the need for such materials was conducted and exercises structured as self-concept enhancers were constructed. In line with its purpose an oral test was given to a total of fifty freshmen college students who are natives of the region and whose primary language is Waray. The instrument, a product of scrutinized and comprehensive review and survey of available books on speech, was basically about the enunciation of consonants, vowels, diphthongs and word stress. The test had three parts. The first part focused on the enunciation of sample words with vowel and consonant and sounds while the second part was on the diphthong sounds. The third part dealt with the enunciation on word stress. Items were equally distributed in all parts and the test was conducted in a favorable place for reading with a prepared tally sheet and tape record to insure systematic data gathering.

**Results and Discussions**

Results revealed that the natives were problematic in enunciating consonantal, vocalic, and diphthongal sounds of English. Specifically, on:

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Along with the aforementioned diagnosed problem is deficiency in knowledge to the other areas of pronunciation such as the articulation of words stressed in the first, second and third syllables. The results served as the bases of the crafting of prepared sound drill materials tailored on the identified difficulties of the natives learning English. The drill materials and exercises consist of three main parts. The first part is the speech organs and the chart of the vowels and consonants sounds while the second part is focused on drills and exercises aimed to augment the natives performance in enunciating English words with focused on vowels, consonants and diphthong sounds identified to be difficult for the native speakers learning English. The third part is suggested enrichment pronunciation activities.

In preparing the instructional materials, the researcher undertook the following: Design Phase; The Development Phase; and Evaluation Phase. The first phase was more on survey of existing materials on pronunciation and evaluation of which in terms of its appropriateness and relevancy to needs of the natives learning English. It was followed by collection and preparation of exercises in developing the target pronunciation skills. In the development phase, the researcher developed set of instructional materials based on the identified target pronunciation skills. The materials were then submitted to experts for evaluation and criticisms which was followed by revisions based on the suggestions given by the panel experts.

To determine the impact of this sound drills, they were then used with the respondents, the natives for a semester. With utmost guidance in its strictest sense, the natives were first introduced to minimal pair drills, then, to phrase drills and finally to sentence drills. This was followed by deliberate enunciation on words stressed on the first, second, and third syllables. A post test was afterwards conducted. Results of the pre- test and post- test were compared and presented graphically. There are four graphs presented below. Each graph represents the magnitude of the impact of the prepared sound drills to problematic aspect in phonology. The vertical axis of the graph is a list the vocalic, consonantal, diphthongal sounds as well as word stress identified to be difficult for the native speakers learning English while the horizontal axis represent the scores in both pre – test and post- test converted into percentage with 20% interval.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**FIGURE 1:**
Impact of Prepared Sound Drills on Vocalic Sounds Difficult for the Native Speakers Learning English

In this figure, the natives were problematic in enunciating five vocalic sounds of the target language. After having used the prepared sound drills, a significant increase in the performance of the natives learning English is evident. Before they were exposed to the prepared sound drills, 40% of the native – respondents accurately enunciated the /æ/ sound. After having used the sound drill; it increased to 68%. For the /ə/ sound, 55% of the native – respondents accurately produced the sound which had slightly increased by 5% afterwards. It can be further inferred from the given data that the natives performed high in enunciating the /i/ sound with a recorded 45% increase followed by /ɛ/ sound with 32% increase and /ð/ sound by 20%.
FIGURE 2:
Impact of Prepared Sound Drills on Consonantal Sounds Difficult for the Native Speakers Learning English

It can be categorically concluded based on the graphical presentation of the above data that the prepared sound drills indeed augmented the performance of the native-respondents learning the consonantal sounds usually difficult for them. The graph shows that the native-respondents perform high in producing accurately the /a/ sound followed by the /f/ sound. It further shows that a parallel performance was recorded for enunciating /ʃ/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /ç/ sounds. A slight increase in their performance in enunciating the /z/ was slightly recorded though.

FIGURE 2:
Impact of Prepared Sound Drills on Diphthongal Sounds Difficult for the Native Speakers Learning English

There are four diphthongal sounds difficult for the native speakers learning English. Of the four sounds, data shows that the /iy/ sound was the most difficult for them followed by /ay/, /ey/ and /aɪə/. After exposure to the prepared sound drills, the performance of the native-respondents in enunciating the identified difficult sounds increased to an ultimate high as shown in the data.

FIGURE 3:
Impact of Prepared Sound Drills on English Words Stressed in the first, second and third syllables Difficult for the Native Speakers Learning English

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The graph shows an astronomical leap of 95%, 80% and 76% accuracy in enunciating the words stressed in the third, first and second syllables respectively that had indeed proven the effectiveness of the prepared sound drills used by native-respondents.

Conclusions

In conclusion, results showed marked improvement of students’ pronunciation skills usually difficult for native speakers learning English. This triumph can be attributed to: teacher’s knowledge of the similarities and differences between the two language systems enable the teacher to predict difficulties of learning English pronunciation among the natives, thus, prepare locally and culturally relevant materials (sounds drill) and that the use of appropriate materials and activities develop students’ oral proficiency skills.

Recommendations

It is then highly recommended that native teachers of English conduct a needs analysis which is vital to gain insights on the weakness of the target learners and as bases for preparation of materials relative to the learner’s needs. Also, native learners of English must be given deliberate and ample knowledge on the sounds and other aspects of English pronunciation to enhance their pronunciation skills. Language teachers should keep abreast with the techniques and styles of language teaching, particularly on the oral communication skills. They should likewise design a specialized pronunciation program that fits to the needs of the native speakers learning English.

REFERENCES


Bio-data of the writer

Rufo A. Labarrete is a faculty of the College of Education of Leyte Normal University, Philippines. Before joining the rooster of faculty in the university, he was a language teacher in science oriented secondary school. He earned his master’s degree in teaching English Language Arts at the country’s national center for teacher education – the Philippine Normal University and is earning his doctorate degree in the same university. He has been in the teaching profession for a decade now.