

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

6.1 Comparison Between the Results of the Contrastive Analysis and the Error Analysis

Based on the contrastive analysis of the consonant systems of the two languages, Persian speakers are expected to have problems only with the English consonants /θ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, and /w/, but the results of the error analysis shows that the English consonants /t/, /d/, /n/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, and /r/ can also be problematic for Persian students due to their differences in place and/or manner of articulation in the two languages.

The contrastive analysis has also predicted that Persian speakers have problems with the English vowels /ɪ/, /ʊ/, /ə/, /ɜ/, /ʌ/, and /ɒ/ because of their absence in Persian. This prediction has been proven to be true by the results of the error analysis.

Persian speakers are predicted to have problems with the English diphthongs /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/ and the English triphthongs /eɪə/, /aɪə/, /ɔɪə/, /əʊə/, and /aʊə/. The results of the error analysis shows that the diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/ and the triphthongs /eɪə/, /aɪə/, and /ɔɪə/, which are among the predictions of the contrastive analysis are not problematic for Persian speakers.

Another prediction based on the CA is that Persian speakers have problems with syllables beginning with vowels, diphthongs, and triphthongs. This prediction is verified by the results of the error analysis.

The predictions indicate that due to the absence of initial two and three-consonant clusters in Persian, Iranian students might have problems with the syllables that begin with such clusters. The results of the error analysis confirm such predictions made by the contrastive analysis.

Persian speakers are also predicted to have problems with syllables ending in three and four-consonant clusters as well as those ending in two-consonant clusters when the first consonant is [p], but the results of the error analysis show that more than half the participants in the test had no problem with some of the clusters. For example, the score for the clusters [ksts], [kt], [mpt], [mpts], and [ŋkt] are 20/25, 18/25, 17/25, 17/25 and 16/25 respectively. The error analysis also indicate that Persian speakers have problems with the

clusters containing consonants which are absent in Persian, for example [θ] in the final clusters [ksθs] and [fθs].

Persian speakers are predicted to have problems with the production of syllabic consonants due to their absence in Persian. The results of the error analysis show that the prediction is correct as Persian speakers have problems with the production of all the English syllabic consonants; that is, they tend to insert vowels between the syllabic consonants and their adjacent consonants.

Based on the predictions, of the Persian speakers might have problems with the placement of stress due to the different rules for the stress patterns in the two languages. The results of the error analysis confirm this prediction and reveal that Persian speakers have more problems with nouns and adjectives than with adverbs and verbs. In addition, Persian speakers do not reduce the unstressed vowels to the schwa.

6.2 The Problems of Persian learners

Persian learners of English run into difficulties in their efforts to acquire the sound system of English. These can be divided into problems with individual speech sounds due to transference from the first language, problems with obtrusive vowel insertion due to differences in syllable formation between Persian and English, problems with lexical stress due to the differences in stress-placement rules, and problems in the use of weak forms.

Several English consonants and vowels do not exist in the Persian sound system. These include the consonants /w/, /θ/, /ð/ and /ŋ/ which are produced as /v/, /s/ or /t/ and /z/

or /d/ respectively. The vowels /ɪ/, /ʊ/, /ə/, /ɜ/, /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ are produced as /i:/, /u:/, /e/, /e/, /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ respectively. There are some other consonants and vowels in the two languages which are slightly different in place or manner of articulation. For example the Persian /r/ is different from that in English in manner of articulation, or the speech sounds /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are produced in a slightly different place of articulation.

Persian is a syllable timed language and Persian learners of English are unused to the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in English words. Unlike native speakers of English, they have no intuitive grasp of lexical stress patterns. Therefore they must learn each new vocabulary item with its pattern of stress attached. This area seems to be neglected in the school syllabus. Since they are only used to seeing words on paper, they are reluctant to reduce unstressed vowels to schwa.

English is a stressed timed language. Persian learners of English have little or no experience in using English in communicative situations, where emphasizing and de-emphasizing words takes on a meaning in context. Furthermore, Persian has a different syntactic structure to English. Because of these factors, they have difficulty producing and perceiving weak forms in English, and they have little grasp of where to speed up, slow down, add stress or de-emphasize words in their sentences for communicative effect.

Lastly, beginners are intensely self-conscious about their pronunciation. They are caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they do not want to be heard using pronunciation which is obviously at variance with that of native speakers. On the other hand, they do not wish to be heard using obviously “foreign” pronunciation in front of their Persian peers. Also, the only areas of pronunciation which they have been exposed to are those dealing with individual speech sounds. They are unfamiliar with, and unaware of the importance of,

suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation such as lexical stress patterns, word forms, and communicative stress and intonation within sentences.

Now that we have outlined the problems which our students have in learning English sounds, and the context in which our teachers address these problems, we can make proposals for improving the teaching of pronunciation in our program. I will begin by proposing a general approach, followed by specific proposals for dealing with the various problem areas.

Obviously, the teaching of pronunciation (as part of English language classes) in our program is severely constrained by lack of sufficient contact hours and large class sizes. Our purpose is to improve our student's ability to communicate in English. With only 240 minutes of class time per week we are forced to pack the maximum amount of useful techniques into each classroom activity. We should focus on those areas of pronunciation that will most facilitate our student's meaningful communicative ability in the shortest amount of time. It would no doubt be beneficial for our students to receive the intensive training necessary to add the learning of speech sounds to their repertoire. However, given the time constraints on our program. We propose that pronunciation training be combined and integrated with grammar, vocabulary, and situational/functional exercises wherever possible. Integrated exercises are more likely to be communicatively meaningful, and are necessary due to the constraints of classroom time. We do note however that teachers often forget to teach pronunciation if at all, so some isolated focus on pronunciation is beneficial.

Communicative problem solving strategies should be the first thing we should teach our students to help them compensate for their pronunciation problems. There is not much we can do about their intrusive vowel insertion, individual speech sound problems, or

problems with lexical stress during the first week of class, but we can empower them to solve pronunciation problems in conversations from the beginning. Strategies include asking for repetition and clarification, asking how to say unfamiliar words, or quite simply writing the word that is causing the problem. Such strategies that native speakers take for granted are completely absent from the students' prior training in English. In our experience they need to be trained and coached before they can use them.

At every available opportunity, our students should be made aware of the communicative value of intonation and placement of emphatic and contrastive stress within sentences. Every dialogue, every role-play, every phrase that is taught is an opportunity to do this, and each should be introduced with both demonstration and practice of how stress or intonation contributes to its meaning and communicative function within the context. They should be encouraged to experiment with phrases to see how the meaning changes with different patterns of intonation and emphasis.

We would like to propose that while our students would dearly like a set of simple, simple and straightforward rules for lexical stress placement, we obviously cannot teach the awkward generative rules given in phonology textbooks or rules with a lot of exceptions. It is better to build their intuitive grasp of these patterns with clear examples and to re-assure them that native speakers often have trouble with unfamiliar words also. We can do this by having them visually mark the stress pattern of new vocabulary and showing how unstressed vowels are reduced. Students who have had the vast majority of their exposure to English in the written form are reluctant to reduce unstressed vowels since it clashes with their written mental representation of the word. Once variation between stressed syllables has been introduced, and in particular, once unstressed vowels have begun to be reduced or even deleted, the obtrusive insertion of vowels within consonant clusters and at the

beginning of specific words will subside. I have observed that advanced learners in Iran generally have much less problem with either lexical stress or vowel insertion.

Because of the non-communicative nature of our students, previous training in English, with its emphasis on individual speech sounds, and because of the time constraints on our classes, We would like to recommend that in addition to focusing on the individual speech sounds, we encourage our students to shift their attention from the segmental to the suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation. I also propose that we focus our attention on the meaning carried by the different areas of English pronunciation within the context of communication, and that this focus be integrated as much as possible into our other communicative learning activities.

6.3 The Significance of Pronunciation Teaching

It is common knowledge that many learners ignore the importance of pronunciation in language learning. Unfortunately, a large number of teachers also ignore it. However, the reasons for this negligence vary greatly.

According to BBC Persian (www.bbc.co.uk/persian), almost all learners of English claim that they do not need to study pronunciation. Many of them are convinced that it is simply a waste of time. They just want to communicate in English and, as long as they are understood, little else is important.

It is obvious that the main purpose of teaching and learning any foreign language is to enable students to communicate in the target language. If this is the case, the meaning of the word 'communication' is worth explaining. In brief, it means to understand and be

understood. A considerable number of learners think that they can communicate in English because they can converse with their teacher and other students. However they are wrong in their thinking. First of all, a teacher can understand his students much more easily than an average person because his ear is used to 'bad English'. Secondly, other students are often speakers of the same language, have similar pronunciation patterns, and make the same mistakes so it is easy for them to understand each other. Thirdly, the classroom situation is not 'real'; it takes place at school and students generally do not have an opportunity to talk to native speakers. In this connection, it is beyond doubt that going to a foreign country and talking to ordinary people, is the best way to practice speaking skills. If they can understand a learner, then he can rightly say that he is able to communicate in English. Certainly, it is a significant achievement.

Unfortunately, many teachers are not aware of the importance of pronunciation. In the first place, they emphasize the role of grammar and vocabulary learning in the acquisition of a foreign language. "The decisive majority of English language teachers help students become competent above all in listening and reading." (Harmer, 2001: 183) Secondly many of them think that pronunciation study is too difficult and worse, boring for young learners. Besides, teachers complain about the lack of high quality and suitable teaching and learning materials and about the lack of time to practice pronunciation. According to Harmer (2001: 183), "they feel they have much to do already and pronunciation teaching will only makes things worse." Moreover, Harmer (2001: 183) adds that "there are teachers who claim that students acquire quite good pronunciation in the course of their studies without specific pronunciation teaching."

However, the acquisition of reasonable pronunciation by some students without any effort from the side of the teacher depends on a number of factors. Kenworthy (1990: 4-9)

specifies some of them, in particular "the phonetic abilities of learners, integrative motivation and achievement motivation." Equally, it appears that the number of students who appreciate the importance of good pronunciation is limited. Taking these facts into account, teachers ought to convince their students of the need to study pronunciation strictly and help them to learn how to pronounce English sounds correctly. What is more, it can be suggested that the very first English lesson should deal with pronunciation. If students do not have an opportunity to practice good pronunciation at the beginning of their learning, they may build their habits in the wrong way. For this reason, learning words without pronunciation during beginning lessons might be damaging to their general success. It is generally recognized that pronunciation is the first and most important thing native speakers notice during a conversation with a non-native speaker. Knowing grammar and vocabulary is important but provided that the speaker is able to pronounce those structures or words correctly. Additionally, native speakers are more likely to understand someone, even in spite of grammatical errors, if this person uses correct pronunciation. When mispronounced, the simplest words will prevent the speaker from communicating effectively in English.

In order to emphasize the importance of this problem, I would like to present one anecdote about poor pronunciation. A few days ago, when I was walking back and forth, in the faculty waiting for a friend, I came across a student from Nigeria. He was new to the faculty, and apparently was going to ask for some guidance. He started speaking to me, but I kept asking "What? What?" He repeated his sentence again and again. Finally, I said "Ah-ha!" because, although with difficulty, I understood his meaning. His choice of words and grammar were good, but I could not understand him because of his pronunciation. This example demonstrates that correct pronunciation guarantees communicative efficiency. Such experiences emphasize that pronunciation is an integral part of communication. One

may conclude that without proper pronunciation nobody can say that he or she knows the English language well.

Harmer (2000: 183) also argues convincingly that "it is thanks to pronunciation teaching that students not only become aware of different sounds and sound features, but can also improve their speaking immeasurably". Subsequently, he claims that "concentrating on sounds, showing where they are made in the mouth, making students aware of where words should be stressed, all these things give them extra information about spoken English and help them achieve the goal of improved comprehension and intelligibility."

Some teachers claim that pronunciation teaching is discouraging because very few learners achieve native-like pronunciation. But it is worth emphasizing the fact that native-like pronunciation may be a goal only for some, and not all learners. According to Kenworthy (1983: 3) "for the majority of learners a far more reasonable goal is to be comfortably intelligible." In this case, strong phonetic interference from the native language is not present and we are able to understand a learner. Harmer (2001: 184) also maintains that "perfect pronunciation is achieved extremely rarely by students. What is more, some of them do not want to sound like native speakers. Frequently, they prefer retaining their foreign accent, which is a part of their identity.

Taking everything into account, it appears that native-like pronunciation is an inappropriate aim for most learners. Achieving pronunciation which is good enough for students to be always understood should be one of the main goals of foreign language learners. To sum up, We would like to present a list of *realistic goals of pronunciation*

teaching that need to be addressed in order to develop communicative competence.

According to Morley (In Wrembel, 2002: 175), the goals are as follows:

- 1) Functional intelligibility – developing spoken English that is easy to understand for listeners.
- 2) Functional communicability – developing spoken language that serves communicative needs effectively.
- 3) Increased self-confidence – developing a positive self-image.
- 4) Speech monitoring abilities and speech-modification strategies that will allow students to develop intelligibility, communicability and confidence outside the classroom.

The overall aim is for learners to develop spoken English that will serve their individual needs and allow them to form a positive image of themselves as speakers of a foreign language.

6.4 Teaching Pronunciation

Pronunciation involves not only individual sounds, but also word stress, sentence stress, intonation, and word linking. All these influence the sound of spoken English. English pronunciation involves too many complexities for learners to struggle for a complete elimination of his native accent, but improving pronunciation will help self esteem, facilitate communication, and possibly lead to a better job or at least more respect in the workplace. Effective communication is of the greatest importance, so the teacher should choose first to work on problems that significantly hinder communication. He/She should remember that his/her students also need to learn strategies for dealing with poor pronunciation but bearing in mind that native pronunciation is to a great extent an unrealistic goal.

A student's first language often interferes with English pronunciation. For example, /r/ is post-alveolar in English but not in Persian, so when a Persian speaker pronounces 'right' with the tongue touching the alveolar ridge, an Englishman may hear 'night' instead. Sometimes the students will be able to identify some pronunciation problems and sometimes they won't. The teacher can ask them for feedback on their learning, but he/she will also need to observe them over time and make notes of their pronunciation. Another challenge resulting from differences between the first language and the foreign language is that although most language learners can distinguish between sounds, they are not able to pronounce the sounds from the foreign language correctly if these are not found in the native language. For example, the vowels, as in the difference between 'ship' and 'sheep'. The teaching of articulatory phonetics can increase their awareness of subtle sound differences.

Here are some specific articulatory features which can be taught in the classroom or in the language laboratory:

Voicing

Voiced sounds will make the throat vibrate. For example, /g/ is a voiced sound while /k/ is not, even though the mouth is in the same position for both sounds. The teacher can ask their students to touch their throats while pronouncing voiced and voiceless sounds. They should feel the vibration when the voiced sounds are produced.

Aspiration

Aspiration refers to a puff of air when a sound is produced. Many languages have far fewer aspirated sounds than English, and students may have trouble perceiving the aspiration. The English [p], [t], [k] are commonly known as aspirated sounds. Although these are not always aspirated, at the beginning of a word they usually are. To illustrate aspiration, the teacher can have his/her students hold up a piece of facial tissue a few inches away from

their mouths and push it with a puff of air while pronouncing a word containing the target sound.

Articulation

The teacher can draw simple diagrams of mouth, tongue and lip positions on the board. He/She should make sure all the students can clearly see his/her mouth while the sounds are sounds. He/She can also ask the students use a mirror to see their mouth, lips, and tongue while they imitate the teacher.

Intonation

Word or sentence intonation can be mimicked by humming. This will take the students' attention off of the meaning of a word or sentence and help them focus on the intonation.

Linking

We pronounce phrases and even whole sentences as one smooth sound instead of a series of separate words. 'Will Amy go away,' is rendered 'Willaymeegowaway.' To help learners, the teacher should link words, start at the end of a sentence and have the students repeat a phrase, adding more of the sentence as they can master it. For example, 'gowaway,' then be followed by 'aymeegowaway,' and finally 'Willaymeegowaway' without any pauses between words.

Vowel Length

The teacher can demonstrate varying vowel lengths within a word by stretching rubber bands on the longer vowels and letting them contract on shorter ones. Then he/she let the students try it. For example, the word 'fifteen' would have the rubber band stretched for the

'ee' vowel, but the word 'fifty' would not have the band stretched because both of its vowels are uttered quickly.

Syllables

The teacher can have students count syllables in a word and hold up the correct number of fingers, or place objects on the table to represent each syllable.

He/She can illustrate syllable stress by clapping softly and loudly corresponding to the syllables of a word. For example, the word 'beautiful' would be loud-soft-soft. The teacher can practice with short lists of words with the same syllabic stress pattern ('beautiful,' 'telephone,' 'Florida') and then see if his/her learners can list other words with that pattern.

Specific Sounds

Minimal pairs, such as 'bit/bat' that differ by only one sound, are useful for helping students distinguish similar sounds. They can be used to illustrate voicing 'curl/girl' or commonly confused sounds 'play/pray'. The teacher should remember that it's the sound and not the spelling he/she is focusing on.

Tongue Twisters

Tongue twisters are useful for practicing specific target sounds; besides, they're fun. The teacher should make sure the vocabulary isn't too difficult.

6.5 Recommendation for further Research

As poor pronunciation can make a foreign language learner very difficult to understand, other features such as poor sentence stress and intonational skills can have an

equally devastating effect on communication and can make a conversation frustrating and unpleasant for both learners and their listeners. Listeners rely on the word emphasized, and patterns of intonation to understand the meaning of what the speaker says. The use of an inappropriate sentence stress and intonation pattern may give rise to misunderstandings. Such misunderstandings can be major or minor, depending on the context in which the sentence stress and intonation pattern are used. As Celce Murica (1996: 216) states, "Language teachers have lately become more aware of this and have shifted the focus of their pronunciation teaching more towards the inclusion of suprasegmentals alongside segmentals with a view of improving general comprehensibility." As these suprasegmental features have not been included in this research, they can be focused on as research subject by other researchers who are interested in this field of research.