Mother Tongue Influence on Spoken English

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Abstract

Pronunciation is not a major problem in a language classroom until it hinders meaning making. For instance, when dealing with minimal pairs, it becomes essential to pay attention to the pronunciation of words. In the Indian context, Hindi (and its dialects) is the mother tongue of a majority of the population and the number of speakers of English as a second language is on the rise. A good number of people use the two languages and the impact of Hindi on English pronunciation is evident in speech.
This paper talks about the differences in the sound systems of two languages (English and Hindi) and how these differences cause problem in acquisition of second language sound system. The study attempts to identify the sounds of English which are the most affected by the sounds of Hindi, and, to suggest classroom activities to help reduce this effect. This paper also presents a few sample activities created for the purpose.

1.Introduction

In the Indian context, the capability to converse in English has become an issue related to jobs and prestige. Indian movies such as 'English - Vinglish' reflect the state of the Indian society and the value that it attaches to the language and the skill. Speaking skill does not get its due share of attention in the average Indian classroom; it is assumed that the learners will pick up the skill from other classroom activities and instructions (Pal, 2013) [1]. As a consequence, the Indian learners of English are not able to develop proper skill and confidence to converse in English.

Pennington & Richards, (1986) [2] point out that 'Pronunciation is largely identified with the articulation of individual sounds and to a lesser extent, with the stress and intonation patterns of the target language.' This reflects in the Indian classrooms as sounds are emphasized but speech in native-like accent is not given much importance. Another reason for this could also be the fact that the variety and a numbers of dialects found is vast to such an extent that it is practically impossible to work on all the accents in a classroom. Thus, the sounds of a language are very important in Indian classrooms and are the area of problems relating to spoken skills. There is a need to identify the problems related to pronounciation in the Indian context.

2. Problem

As MacKay (1967) [3] points out, a pronunciation "...error may be due to a transfer from the native language; an analogy with something correctly learned in the foreign language; a wild guess, vagueness in remembering the right form; or general lack of accuracy and language skill." Of all these, transfer from the native language or interference is the most common one. Most of the errors made are due to the difference in sound systems and due to the misinterpretation of spelling symbols. The ability to pronounce the structures or words is as important as the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Even the simplest words misspoken, keeps one from communicating effectively. Sometimes (for instance in the case of minimal pairs) a change of one sound may bring about a change in the meaning of the word, to an extent that communication might get hampered. For examples see table 1.

Table 1: Minimal pairs

Pronunciation	Word	Pronunciation	Word
/ʃɪp/	Ship	/sɪp/	Sip
/pen/	Pen	/pæn/	Pan
/siːl/	Seal	/ziːl/	Zeal
/sut/	Suit	/ʃuːt/	Shoot
/voʊt/	Vote	/boʊt/	Boat
/fliz/	Fleas	/pliz/	Please
/ʃɪp/	Ship	/ʃip/	Sheep

Model speaking, on the part of the teacher, is considered a good way to introduce the proper speaking skill in the average classroom setup. It is believed that the learners will pick up the skill from the classroom environment, but often even the teacher's pronunciation skills are colored and the learners acquire the colored skills from the classroom thereby being unable to acquire the proper skill in spoken English.

Another reason why learning Pronunciation is difficult is because by the time the learners are introduced to the second language sound system they have a fossilized sound system of their mother tongue, which hinders the acquisition of the L2 sound system. Nunan (1999) [4] suggests that the best time for students to learn a language in order to become as native-like in their pronunciation as possible is before the onset of puberty. He describes The Critical Period as 'a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which language is increasingly difficult to acquire'.

A contrastive analysis of the sound systems of any two languages can give us an estimate of the probable problem sounds that the speakers may face in second language. In the given table the sounds of English and Hindi have been compared. The highlighted areas could thus be the probable sound areas where the native speakers of Hindi have problem in English pronunciation.

Table 2: Contrastive consonental sounds of English and Hindi (Pal, 2013)

Consonants of English									
Place / Manner	Bilabial	Labio dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	Retro flex	Palatal	Velar	Labio velar	Glottal
Plosives	p b			t d				k g		
Nasal	m			n				ŋ		
Affricates					tʃ dʒ					
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ					h
Lateral Fricative				l						
Glide						r	y		w	
Consonants of Hindi									
Place / Manner	Bilabial	Labio dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	Retro flex	Palatal	Velar	Labio velar	Glottal
Plosives	p b		t̪ d̪			ʈ ɖ	č ǰ	k g		
Nasal	m		n				ɲ	ñ		
Affricates										
Fricative		f v		s	ʃ	ʂ				h
Lateral Fricative			l							
Glide						r	y			

Figure 1: Contrastive Vowel Sounds of English and Hindi (Pal, 2013)
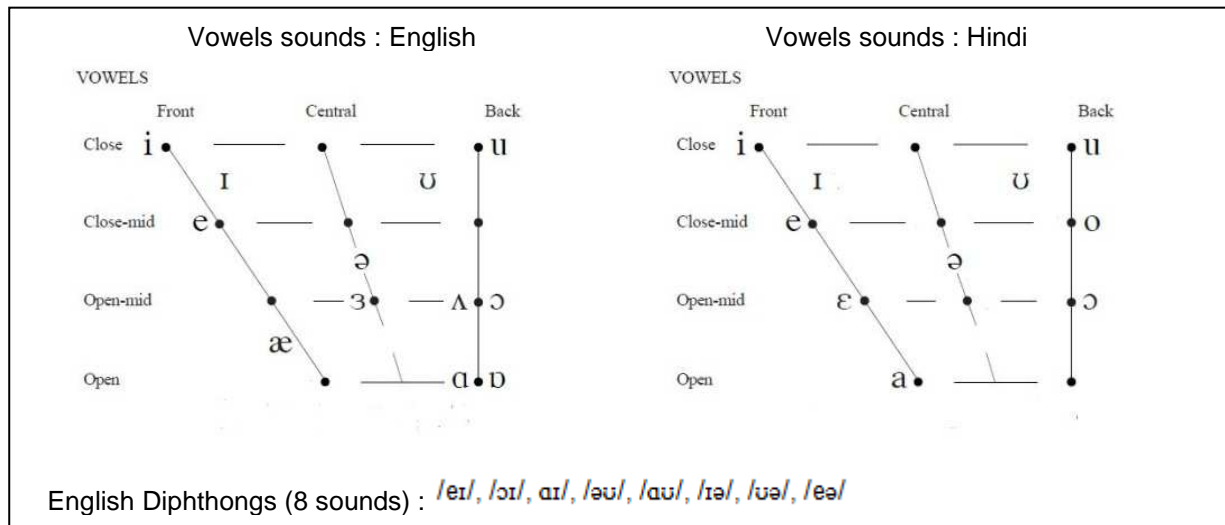
O'Conner, (1980) [5] also identifies the problem areas of English as a Second Language, which the native speakers of various languages face. For the speakers of Hindi (p. 142) he identifies around seventeen sounds / areas which the speakers of Hindi might find troublesome. Some of the areas of relevance to this study are:

- /f/ and /p/ are confused, /p/ being used for both.
- /ð/ and /θ/ are replaced by dental stops, which cause confusion with /t/ and /d/.
- /z/ and /ʒ/ are confused, /z/ (or sometimes /dz/ or /dʒ/) being used for both.

Of all the problem areas identified by O'Conner, not all are a threat to meaning making. Yet, it is advisable that the learner is enabled to distinguish between the various sounds while producing and comprehending.

This study aims at finding the English pronunciation problems faced by speaker of Hindi and at devising classroom suggestions to overcome the identified problems. It was found in the study that the Indian speakers of English face major sound related problems in fricatives and vowel sounds and often made errors in cases of sound spelling desparity.

3. Methodology
3.1 Instrumentation
Three kinds of tools were designed for the purpose of this study.

Questionnaires to find out the status of English pronunciation in the language usage patterns and to gather data to substantiate the hypothesis of the study. The aim of the tool was to gather language use related data from the learner. The tool also helped estimate the words that the learners had problem pronouncing.

A Pre-Test tool was constructed to test the hypothesis and pinpoint the sounds and areas of pronunciation in which the learners faced problems. The tool aimed at finding out the sounds that were most problematic for the sample group. The same tool was re-used for the post-test.

50 Teaching Activities, relating to the identified problem sound areas, were constructed and a few were used in the classroom, with the aim of helping learners improve their English Pronunciation. Various books; standard and local games such as simple card games and Hide and Seek; puzzles; quiz and others became the source and inspiration for the various activities in this bank. The activities contained guided, controlled and free tasks. Samples from each type of the activity are given below.

Guided activity: Categorize

Working in pairs, word cards would be distributed to the learners such that each pair has at least five cards. The teacher would draw a table on the black board. Each sound heading a column. The learners would be asked to read aloud their cards and categorize them into various columns on the basis of their sounds. There can be separate rounds for initial sound, media sound and final sound.

Controlled activity : Stepping Stones

The objective of the game is to cross the river by stepping on the stones which have the same sound as the one assigned to the student. A stepping stones game would be created on the classroom floor by placing target words written on stone shaped cards. Two parallel lines would be chalked such that they have a distance of some fifteen feet. These would be the two banks of the river. The cards would be spread between the two banks in a random order. Mixed sound cards would be created and put in a small bag. This bag would be placed at one of the banks of the river. The student would go to the middle of the river and play the crocodile of the river. Learners would be asked to pick out a sound card from the bag and read aloud and observe the sound they pick. They would be asked to start from that side of the bank and cross to the other side of the river by stepping on the ten stones which contain the sound they have picked. If a person steps on the wrong stone the crocodile has to catch them. If caught, the learner becomes the next crocodile.

Free activity : Word Snakes and Ladders
A modified Snake and Ladders board game would be created such that in place of numbers there are words with six different sounds. Customized dice can be created. A normal Ludo men and dice, along with a key can also be used to play the game. Learners would be asked to play in groups of four. They would be asked to roll the dice and move to the next word with the sound corresponding to the sound on the top face of the rolled dice. For example: If the dice reads /z/ the student would have to move to the next underlined /z/ sound. The game would follow normal Snakes and Ladders rules.

3.2 Procedure
The study was carried out with the government school students as the sample group. This was done because certain government schools in India start English at class five level. Doing this ensured that the sample group was suitable for the study and the impact of mother tongue on English pronunciation could be seen the best amongst these students.Students of classes six and nine formed the sample frame.
The entire study can be divided into three parts.
Part I: *Designing tools, sampling, pilot and pre-test.* The data obatined from the pre-test was analysed to identify the problem areas faced by speakers of Hindi.
Part II: *Intervention.* Of the identified problem areas, six major sound problems sounds / areas were selected and learners were taught in the class using activities designed to improve their pronunciation skills.
Part III: *Post test, Data analysis and Interpretation.* A post-test was conducted at the end of the intervention period and the data obtained from the Pilot test, Questionnaire, Pre-test and the Post-test was tabulated and analyzed. The analysis of the data aimed at finding out two things:
- What are the sound areas of English in which the mother tongue speakers of Hindi make errors? This was done by analyzing the data obtained from the Pre-test and questionnaires.
- What are the changes brought about, in the learners concepts of sound, by the teaching intervention? This was done by contrastive analysis of the Pre-test and the Post-test.

4. Findings and Implications
The data analysis helped identify and conclude:
- The major pronunciation problem areas faced by speaker of Hindi were:
  1. Fricative sounds such as $/s/, /\int/, /z/, /3/, /d3/$
  2. Plural markers.
  3. Consonant clusters.
  4. Vowel sounds which differed from the Hindi sound system and had varied spelling.
  5. Words which displayed a sound and spelling disparity.
- Out of a total of 13 selected sound positions, improvement was seen in 6 positions. The results were constant at 4 positions and showed a regress at 2 positions. It was observed that in the sounds showing regress in the two specific cases was due error different from that in the pre-test.
- The realization and acknowledgement of correct spoken language enhanced the spoken skill of the learners in multifold manner. Learners were more confident in speech and attempted to speak in English more often.
- The consonantal sounds are easier to learn than the vowel sounds. This is because the differences in the consonantal sounds are more evident (to the Indian audience) in comparison to the minute differences in the vowel sounds.
Correct speech is emphasized over fluent speech in the Indian context. It is thus important to understand the factors affecting correct spoken English. The results of this study help us understand these factors and have implications for classroom planning and curriculum transaction. Teachers in

the Hindi speaking belt can benefit from the study and help their learners work on their pronunciation skills by planning appropriate classroom activity and instruction.

References

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