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PHONETIC DIFFICULTIES FACED BY STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH IN THE LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

Bezliudnyi Oleksandr, Doctor of Pedagogics, Professor of Department of English and Methods of Its Teaching, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University.

ORCID: 0000-0001-5191-4054

E-mail: bezludniy_oi@ukr.net

The article provides a theoretical analysis of students' phonetic complexities while learning a foreign language. Thus, the purpose of the article is to research and analyze students' common phonetic difficulties in the language environment and identify key aspects that constantly affect the acquisition of English. Moreover, the presented investigation describes key factors that influence considerably the acquisition of English by students studying university foreign language courses, namely Practical Phonetics and Theoretical Phonetics at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University.

Keywords: phonological competence; phonetic difficulties; phonological awareness; phonetics; foreign language pronunciation; pronunciation skills; learning foreign language; language environment.

ФОНЕТИЧНІ ТРУДНОЩІ СТУДЕНТІВ У ПРОЦЕСІ ВИВЧЕННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ У МОВНОМУ СЕРЕДОВИЩІ

Безлюдний Олександр, доктор педагогічних наук, професор кафедри англійської мови та методики її навчання, Уманський державний педагогічний університет імені Павла Тичини.

ORCID: 0000-0001-5191-4054

E-mail: bezludniy_oi@ukr.net

У статті представлено теоретичний аналіз фонетичних труднощів студентів при вивченні англійської мови. Актуальність окресленої в статті теми пояснюється зростаючим попитом на кваліфікованих вчителів, які на високому рівні володіють іноземною мовою. Велике значення має фонетична компетентність студентів, які в майбутньому стануть вчителями англійської мови в умовах сучасних викликів цифрової доби. У статті висвітлено теоретичний аналіз фонетичних труднощів, які можуть виникнути під час вивчення англійської мови студентами, з подальшою їх інтерпретацією, а також засоби й методи вдосконалення фонетичної компетентності здобувачів освіти у навчальному середовищі.

Варто зазначити, що інтерес до теми фонетичних труднощів, з якими стикаються студенти при вивченні англійської мови, постійно зростає. Таким чином, мета статті – дослідити та проаналізувати загальні фонетичні труднощі студентів як майбутніх вчителів англійської мови та визначити ключові аспекти, що постійно впливають на якість засвоєння здобувачами освіти англійської мови та формування їхньої комунікативної компетентності. Проаналізовано поняття «фонетична компетентність» та досліджено, що розвиток фонетичної компетентності здобувача освіти визначається низкою його індивідуальних особливостей. Означено фонетичні труднощі студентів при вивченні англійської мови та виокремлено ключові аспекти, які суттєво впливають на опанування англійської мови студентами під час вивчення таких курсів, як Практична фонетика й Теоретична фонетика на факультеті іноземних мов

Уманського державного педагогічного університету імені Павла Тичини. Матеріали цієї статті можуть бути корисними викладачам закладів вищої педагогічної освіти та науковцям, які зацікавлені питаннями оволодіння фонетичною компетентністю та розвитку інішомовної комунікативної компетентності.

Ключові слова: фонетична компетентність; фонетичні труднощі; фонологічна обізнаність; фонематична обізнаність; фонетика; навички вимови; вивчення іноземної мови; мовне середовище.

The rapid influx of technology into our daily lives and the internationalization of the economic marketplace have raised the demand for a literate citizenry to the highest level ever [5].

The highly increased need for mastering foreign languages has led to an increase in requirements for the level of proficiency in a foreign language, and especially pronunciation. It is a well-known fact that to be successful language users, obviously, the learners must be understood properly and clearly and their speech must be distinct and plain enough to interpret the main idea or to express what they mean. However, phonetic difficulties faced by learners seem to be quite frequent and need careful solution and investigation.

In fact, learning a foreign language is a rather complex process which involves the skills of speaking, reading, listening and writing; and deep grounded knowledge of the systems of grammar, lexis, discourse and phonology and mainly, a lot of practice while learning to make it advanced. Of these, accurately acquiring the phonology of another language often proves to be requiring a special teaching system and methodology, a lot of effort and time for learners of a foreign language. In spite of its significance, foreign language phonetic skills are a weak point for learners and an often-neglected aspect of language learning. Whereas research on second language learners' awareness of grammar and lexis has been extensive, phonology has been left aside, and only a handful of studies exist which have specifically aimed to investigate second language learners' awareness about L2 phonology [6].

Thus, the purpose of the article is to research and analyze main phonetic difficulties faced by students learning a foreign language in the language environment.

The research methods are studying, observing and analyzing main phonetic difficulties faced by students learning a foreign language in the language environment.

To achieve this goal, a number of tasks were set:

- to conduct a review of the literature on the topic of phonological difficulties in the language environment;
- to investigate the meaning of phonological competence and to analyze relevant terms definitions;
- to study key aspects that cause phonetic complexities for students studying university courses namely Practical Phonetics, Theoretical Phonetics at Faculty of Foreign Languages of Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University through the viewpoint of the importance of developing phonological competence and good command of English.

Not a great number of ideas and theories can be found on the issue of phonetic difficulties for English second language learners but, fortunately, those that exist have its special impact on learners outcomes (Baker S. K., Beattie T., Nelson N. J., & Turtura J. (2018); Seidenberg M. (2017); Kalinina L. (2015); Nikolayeva S. (2011); Ashby (2011); Olson L & Samuels S. (2003) [4; 13; 2; 3; 8; 12]. Also, it is worth mentioning that The National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL) provides researchers with available access to different files and tools on literacy (it is vital that literacy is implicated in every sphere of our daily lives) [10].

According to Ashby (2011) it is essential to underline that phonology includes not only individual phonetic segments (vowels and consonants), but also other units of speech, such as intonation, tone, stress, pitch, and rhythm. These aspects cannot be separated from one another in the actual process of communication, but each aspect can be singled out for purposes of linguistic analysis. Moreover, each element of this system may cause phonetic difficulties for English second language learners [3].

One more interesting finding on the issue is mentioned by the modern researchers Olson & Samuels (2003) that early learners who began learning their second language in childhood are more likely to produce and perceive second language sounds in a native-like manner than late learners. However, it does not necessarily mean that one's speech will automatically be free of a foreign accent [12].

Without hesitation, we must agree with Elliott (1995) who points out that foreign language instruction does not concern itself with pronunciation skills as much as it does with listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar. Whereas there is some focus on the second language sound system during the first stages of instruction, especially when the second language alphabet is introduced, teachers rarely continue to duly emphasize pronunciation for the rest of the course [6].

It goes without saying that it is rather beneficial for productive communication and excellent speech to put all possible efforts and to practice, develop and improve second language learners' pronunciation skills in the learning environment for best achievements. Concerning speech, a learner mispronouncing words all the time or even part of the time puts pressure on the listener's ear. Sometimes it is possible to make the necessary correction to assure awareness.

To find and select the most effective methods of teaching foreign pronunciation is impossible without clear consideration of how this complex process takes place in real conditions and which problems or complexities might appear; generally, it can be a rather hard task or even sometimes frustrating. Constant effort is required to understand, produce and use the target language. Also, well-chosen methods of teaching foreign pronunciation to students are valuable as they allow the latter to practice language skills and master phonological competence as an outcome of their learning path and as a result, they can become successful in their communication and development.

Also, phonetic difficulties were studied by Greenwood (2002), who gives a list of problems that he believes to be the cause for the difficulties encountered by L2 learners as regards the pronunciation of the target language. Among them, he evokes personal factors: the lack of self-confidence, or sometimes a real embarrassment of speaking a foreign language in front of others. The true difficulty in hearing, and therefore producing L2 sounds and prosodic features, also exists. Besides, the author points to methodology problems, added to conventional beliefs shared by the teacher, e.g. that students will pick up the right pronunciation by themselves over time, or that pronunciation is simply not so important. He added that without a change of those beliefs, learners will necessarily have phonetic difficulties and make pronunciation errors [9].

To be added, Flege J. & Fletcher K. (2005) point out that phonology formulates the rules of pronunciation for separate sounds and sound combinations. The rules of reading are based on the relation of sounds to orthography and present certain difficulties in learning the English language. Thus, vowel sounds are pronounced not only as we name the letters corresponding to them and it causes difficulties as well [7].

It is essential to take into consideration the definition of phonological (phonetic) competence. N. F. Borysko suggests that phonological (phonetic) competence can be an individual's ability to correctly articulate and produce intonation design of own statements and understanding of speech based on the complex and dynamic interaction of relevant knowledge, skills and general linguistic awareness and phonetic awareness [1, p. 108].

Besides, mastering phonological competence by students learning a foreign language is a key responsibility for the development of their communication skills, since it not only gives the ability to understand other people's statements but also to express their ideas, beliefs, points of view and feel confident in speaking.

It is necessary to highlight that development of student's phonological competence is determined by a number of their individual characteristics:

- the overwhelming use of different learning styles;
- age characteristics (memory, perception, attention);
- defects of students' speech in their native language, which can have a considerable influence and more power on the study process of the foreign language;
- readiness to learn a foreign language [2, p. 12].

Obviously, nowadays exists an urgent demand for mastering communicative competence, which involves knowledge of how to use the language in the process of communicating, adequate social and cultural knowledge, skills and skills of interpersonal interaction and the individual's ability to adapt their communicative behaviour to contextual conditions that change [2, p. 24].

In the development of phonological competence, the first-year students of the language faculty face difficulties that can be divided into 3 conventional groups:

- 1) difficulties associated with the complexity of the foreign language being studied;
- 2) difficulties associated with the individual characteristics of students;
- 3) difficulties associated with the methods of development of phonological competence [2, p. 26].

Partially, these difficulties are tackled by the National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL) is a partnership among literacy experts, university researchers, and technical assistance providers, with funding from the United States Department of Education.

Importantly, the mission of the National Center on Improving Literacy is to increase access to, and use of, evidence-based approaches to screen, identify, and teach students with literacy-related disabilities, including dyslexia. According to Learning Literacy Glossary, the following terms and their definitions are selected and presented in Table 1 on the issue under analysis [10] (see Table 1).

Table 1

Terms Definitions outlined by National Center on Improving Literacy

Terms	Term Definitions
Phoneme	The smallest sound part in spoken language, like /c/ in "cat".
Phonemic Awareness	The ability to identify and play with individual sounds in spoken words.
Phonics	Reading instruction on understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.
Phonological Awareness	The ability to recognize that spoken words are made up of individual sound parts.
Phonological Memory	The ability to store and recall the sounds of speech in short term memory. It is distinct from phonological awareness, which only refers to the ability to identify sounds.
Phonological Processing	The ability to quickly and correctly hear, store, recall, and make different speech sounds.

According to Moats & Tolman (2019), possible root causes of phonetic difficulty may include:

- lack of explicit instruction in phonological and phonemic awareness;
- lack of practice in phonological and phonemic awareness;
- a core problem in the phonological processing system of language [11].

Having analyzed the data collected, after observing university English major students who are to become English teachers in order to discover which phonetic difficulties students learning English experience during communication, the following findings were made: 4 sounds difficult for the learners were peculiar to the English language – /θ/, /ð/, /w/, /r/. In Ukrainian, it is impossible to find an analogue of one of these sounds, so they should be assimilated through a descriptive path or by ear, but not by using “similar” ones in their native language. However, students had a tendency to use Ukrainian sounds instead of appropriate English sounds (see Table 2).

Table 2

**Common use of Ukrainian sounds
by students instead of appropriate English sounds**

<i>Ukrainian /s/ was substituted for English /w/</i>
<i>Ukrainian /c/ was substituted for English /ð/</i>
<i>Ukrainian /z/ was substituted for English /θ/</i>
<i>Ukrainian /p/ was substituted for English /r/</i>

It was seen that transferring Ukrainian sounds into English speech seems to be challenging and requires much more practice and drills because phonological systems of English and Ukrainian languages are different. To overcome it students need to practice correct sound pronunciation as much as possible. They have to get rid of associations with their mother tongue when speaking English and to understand that those sounds are not similar. Moreover, sounds that cause phonological errors due to interference not only between Ukrainian and English sounds but also between English similar sounds exist. These sounds demand much work, explanation and long practice, e.g. [w] and [v]. For that reason, articulation gymnastics could be a productive way to implement as a steady practice and improvement.

Another sound that caused difficulties was /h/. This English sound is, somehow, similar to Ukrainian /x/, but an English one is aspirated as it is pronounced with an accompanying forceful expulsion of air. Ukrainian sound does not have such a feature, even so, 27 % of students learning English pronounce this kind of sound instead of the original one.

To overcome this difficulty it is necessary to highlight the originality of an English sound, to explain how it should be pronounced and also to practice the sound through a different line of exercises. In such case, it is significant to give precise instructions to students, which can assist them to improve their incorrect pronunciation and to pronounce the foreign language sound acceptably.

The most common errors during communication and speech made by students were noticed too (see Table 3):

Table 3

**The most common errors during communication and speech
made by students learning English**

– weakening of differentiation in the pronunciation of long and short vowels
– clarity in the pronunciation of diphthongs
– distortion of the articulation of consonants
– errors in emphasis, including the transfer of emphasis on unannounced syllables
– incorrect rhythm
– incorrect intonation

As a result, conclusions were drawn regarding the study and analysis of the relevant scientific papers, opinions of researchers in the field of phonology, steady observation of students learning and communicating a foreign language in the language environment.

Importantly, to avoid phonetic difficulties when English major students learn a foreign language, the biggest asset can be the following aspects:

1. Teachers need a good grasp of articulatory phonetics;
2. Students must understand the physical aspects of sound production;
3. They must possess a well-trained ear;
4. Students need transcription skills;
5. They must have the knowledge of the phonology contrasts, major allophones;
6. Teachers must be well aware of applied theory;
7. Both teachers and students need to have a good knowledge of the mother tongue and the target language.

To conclude, it is necessary to take into consideration that students who experience phonetic complexities or problems with pronunciation of particular sounds, intonation, must be paid more careful attention to. It is recommended to give them detailed, deliberate and distinct instructions in phonological awareness and it would be beneficial for such students facing phonetic complexities to do more steady practice and support them in this way in order to develop and improve students' phonological competence and at the same time develop communicative competence. It has a close connection with the consecutive and purposeful acquiring of related knowledge and formation of the students' pronunciation skills during any kind of speech, task or activity.

The conducted research may suggest such further recommendations for studying as determining possibilities of developing the students' phonological competence as well as ways and methods of overcoming students' phonetic complexities when learning a foreign language within the framework of the curriculum of language subjects for the development of phonological competence in the educational process.

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