The Pronunciation Effect on Vocabulary Choices of Multilingual English Speakers in Oral Discourse

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BACKGROUND

In ESOL classrooms is common that speakers of other languages face problems of comprehensibility when they communicate in English. According to National Center for Education Statistics, In the United States in 2016 there were 4.9 million of public-school students who were English learners, that number represents 9.6 % of the total student population. These learners have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds that affect the way they learn English as a new language, some English phonemes are not part of their phonetic inventory and could be challenging for them to reproduce them correctly in the early stages of their English learning.

Through the years a lot of research studies have been conducted in pronunciation and pronunciation but in most studies these language components are studied as separate units.

Pronunciation and phonology

Crowther, Trofimovich, Saito, & Isaacs (2015) have investigated the effects of pronunciation and accent in listener comprehensibility. Some other studies shows the L1 influence effect in the oral production of an ELL at the segmental level, Baker (1982); Tam (2005); Tuan (2010). In other studies they have tried to identify those challenging segmental sounds for Mandarin speakers and how they are related to phonotactic constrains. (Tzwe, 1987; Chang, 2001; Huang, & Radant 2001).

Pronunciation and vocabulary

Other authors have discussed the idea that there is a relationship between vocabulary and pronunciation and when these components are taught separately the ELL pronunciation is affected. Nicolaidis & Mattheoudakis (2012). For some researches one of the difficulties to integrate pronunciation and vocabulary is the way to assess both elements accurately. Hardin (2017) discussed the problems and inconsistencies to design a scale to rate pronunciation

In this study I propose to integrate pronunciation and vocabulary to investigate if pronunciation has an effect in the learners' choice of words.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does pronunciation affect a multilingual English speaker's decision to use words in oral discourse?

METHODS

This pilot study follows a qualitative approach to investigate the relationship between pronunciation and vocabulary choices of a multilingual ELL.

Instruments

For the data collection six instruments were used to obtain oral and written samples of the participant. The instruments were designed to address the variables under investigation that were pronunciation and vocabulary choice.

Procedures

The participant was informed that this research was part of a pilot study and her responses would be recorded for further analysis. She also was told that her identity would remain anonymous.

The participant was asked to complete six different tasks in order to collect information about the possible relationship between pronunciation and vocabulary choices of a multilingual ELL.

The first instrument was designed to obtain a speech sample of the participant and analyze her pronunciation. The participant was asked to talk about her country for two minutes.

- The second instrument used in this research was a written task using the same question that the first task but this time the participant was asked to write a paragraph about her country. The written sample was used to triangulate the data and see if there were variations in the vocabulary choices.
- The third instrument of data collection was designed to analyze the participant's pronunciation of isolated words. In this task was used a chart with pairs of words that focus on phonemes that could be challenging to pronounce for Mandarin Speakers. e.g. "big" and "fish"
- The fourth instrument was used to explore the second variable that was vocabulary choice. For this task the participant was provided with four pairs of sentences and she was asked to choose one sentence and read it aloud. e.g.
1. We went to the *beach* last weekend.
2. We went to the ocean last weekend.
- The fifth instrument was used to explore the participant pronunciation in complete sentences. In this task the participant was invited to read a written passage that includes the target vocabulary from previous tasks.
- The last instrument was an interview to know the reasons behind the participant's vocabulary choices in the previous tasks and see if those vocabulary choices were influenced by pronunciation as well.

RESULTS

The participant's responses in the six tasks presented were recorded and then analyzed to see if there is a relationship between her pronunciation and vocabulary choices.

Task 1

The participant used several sentences to share information about her country, she talked about the capital, famous places, language, and food, following that order, using 159 words.

Task 2

The written sample provided for the participant was shorter that the speech sample, it contains only 30 words. She wrote about the capital of her country, famous places and food. She omitted the language topic.

Task 3

In task 3 the participant was asked to read a set of twenty-four words with phonemes that could be challenging for Mandarin speakers. The following chart, as seen in Table 1 presents the participant's responses. The target words at the segmental level and their phonetic transcription are written in black. The participant's responses with their phonetic transcription are in blue.

Table 1: Target segmental words from task 3

/ɪ/	/iː/	/ ɔ /	/ʊ/	/u/	/eɪ/	/ ɔɪ/
Big	Sleep	Fall	Look	Food	Play	Toy
/bɪg/	/sliːp/	/fɔl/	/lʊk/	/fud/	/pleɪ/	/tɔɪ/
/biːg/	/esleep/	/fɔl/	/lɔk/	/fud/	/pleɪ/	/tɔɪ/
Fish	Sheep	Claw	Wood	Blue	Lake	Boy
/fɪʃ/	/ʃiːp/	/klɔ/	/wʊd/	/blu/	/leɪk/	/bɔɪ/
/fɪʃ/	/ʃiːp/	/kləu/	/wʊd/	/blʊ/	/leɪk/	/bɔɪ/
/ʒ/	/v/	/f/	/s/	/z/	/l/	/n/
Pleasure	Vacation	Fault	Small	Was	Lord	Sound
/ˈpleʒ·ər/	/veɪˈkeɪ·ʃən/	/fɔlt/	/smɔl/	/wɔs/	/lɔrd/	/saʊnd/
/ˈpleʒ·ər/	/becation/	/fɔt/	/smal/	/wʌz/	/lard/	/sʌnd/
Treasure	Give	Coffee	Mice	Cousin	World	Sun
/ˈtreʒ·ər/	/gɪv/	/ˈkɔ·fi/	/maɪs/	/ˈkʌz·ən/	/wɜrld/	/sʌn/
/ˈtreʒ·ər/	/gib/	/ˈkɔ·fi/	/maɪs/	/ˈkʌz·ən/	/warld/	/sæn/

Task 4

In task number 4 the participant had to choose between pairs of sentences with vocabulary that could pose pronunciation difficulties for Mandarin Speakers and read them aloud.

Table 2 vocabulary assessment at the phonotactic level

Number	Target vocabulary	Second option
1	Sheet	*Piece*
2	*Beach*	Ocean
3	Thanks	*Thank you*
4	*Right*	Correct

Task 5

In task number 5 the participant was asked to read a text to collect information about her pronunciation of the target vocabulary Table 3 shows the phonetic transcription of the participant's pronunciation at the segmental and phonotactic level.

Table 3: Vocabulary assessment at segmental and phonotactic level

/ɪ/	/iː/	/ ɔ /	/ʊ/	/u/	/eɪ/	/ ɔɪ/
	Sleep			Food	Play	Toy
	/sliːp/			/fud/	/pleɪ/	/tɔɪ/
	/esliːp/			/fud/	/pleɪ/	/tɔɪ/
	/sliːpɪŋ/			/fud/.	/pleɪ/	/tɔɪs/
Fish		Claw	Wood		Lake	
/fɪʃ/		/klɔ/	/wʊd/		/leɪk/	
/fɪʃ/		/klau/	/wʊd/		/leɪk/	
/fɪʃ/		/kləus/	/wʊds/		/leɪk/	
/ʒ/	/v/	/f/	/s/	/z/	/l/	/n/
Pleasure		Fault	Small	Was	Lord	Sound
/ˈpleʒ·ər/		/fɔlt/	/smɔl/	/wʌz/	/lɔrd/	/saʊnd/
/ˈpleʒ·ər/		/fɔt/	/smal/	/wɔs/	/lard/	/sʌnd/
/ˈpleʒ·ə/		/fɔt/	/esmɔl/	/wɔs/	/lard/	/sʌnd/
Give			Mice		World	Sun
/gɪv/			/maɪs/		/wɜrld/	/sʌn/
/gib/			/maɪs/		/warld/	/sæn/
/gibɪŋ/			/maɪs/		/warld/	/sʌn/

Task 5

After the competition of the five tasks the participant was interviewed. The participant's responses showed some difficulties at the segmental and phonotactic level exist. Her responses also showed that the participant decided to avoid certain vocabulary that present comprehension problems for the listener, especially in the work setting.

DISCUSSION

The findings showed some preliminary evidence of the cognitive demands that some learners face to improve their pronunciation as it was claimed by Mora & Darcy (2017). The results were also consistent with the findings that identify the challenge that segmental y phonotactic sounds present for Mandarin speakers, when they are learning English (Baker, 1982; Tzwe, 1987; Chang, 2001; Huang, 2001).

The analysis of the participant's pronunciation at the segmental and phonotactic level presented variations in the target vocabulary assessed, it can be noticed that the participant pronunciation of vowels changes when they are between certain consonants. The participant responses seem to indicate that pronunciation difficulties have an impact in the election of the vocabulary she uses to communicate in the work environment, it is probably that for the nature of her work she decided to avoid certain words to minimize the risk of misunderstandings.

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

The results could help teachers to have a better understanding of the pronunciation challenges that English learners face and how pronunciation could influence their vocabulary choices. Learners could also be aware of the differences of phonetic inventories in their L1 and English. The results suggested that these pronunciation difficulties are presented in other languages as well.

LIMITATIONS

This pilot study has limitations such as the size of the sample, it would be recommended to extend the study to a larger sample to knw if the results are consistent. The instruments can also need to be tested in a different context to see if they show similar results. Another limitation is the participant linguistic characteristics, it is probably that the same study with an ELL with a different linguistic background could exhibit different findings.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to continue doing research in this area that could help to improve the instruction in ESOL settings. Pronunciation and vocabulary are two elements in language learning that should be explored and integrate in research to get more insight of how sociolinguistics factors affect the learner proficiency in English.

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