A PHONOLOGICAL OUTLOOK ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF LEARNING ENGLISH AND ITS IMPLICATION ON THE TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Learners of English as a foreign language frequently find it difficult to pronounce English words acceptably. Empirical data obtained from Professional Teacher Education and Training (PLPG) program at Universitas Jember illustrate these phonological difficulties. This article tries to look at the problem and propose possible practical ways of solving the problem. In the context of TEFL, Explicit Instruction and Audio Lingual Method are considered relevant for equipping learners with phonological knowledge and skills to produce accepted pronunciation. During pre-service education, phonological-related courses should be explicitly taught. Meanwhile, improving phonological competence should be part of teacher professional development program.

There are at least two main reasons that greatly influence the choice of this topic, and both reasons are of my personal experiences. The first reason or experience can be traced back as far as some ten years ago when my daughter was still in the first year of elementary school. A mother of my daughter’s friend, when teaching about numbers (number 1) to his son at home, pronounced the number 1 as /səna/ rather than /wʌn/. She pronounced the number as it was written. The same thing happened to the other numbers. She did this because, at school, the teacher often asked students to write the number by using letters. So, in order that her son would write number 1 (one) correctly, she exposed her son with the sound of the number as it was spelled. In other words, rather than teaching her son the correct sound, she taught him the correct spelling from the Indonesian language perspective. The second reason or experience can be traced back as far as 4-5 months ago when I became an instructor and assessor of Teacher Professional Education and Training (PLPG) program at my campus. Apart from many weaknesses that teachers made in terms of pedagogical and content or knowledge of English, what really impressed me was that many teachers still had problems with basic English pronunciation. There were many unnecessary pronunciation errors made by the teachers. What I mean by unnecessary errors are very basic errors that a teacher should not make i.e. those errors might belong to students, but not the teachers. For example, many teachers pronounce the word “paper” as /ˈpiːpər/ or /ˈpeɪpər/ rather than /ˈpeɪpoʊr/; “daughter” as /ˈdaʊtər/ or /ˈdoʊtər/ rather than /ˈdɔːtər/ and “clever” as /ˈklɪvər/ rather than /ˈklevər/, and many more. These words are very often used in the day-to-day learning of English in the class. When a teacher pronounced the words incorrectly, then students will also imitate those incorrect pronunciations. These two experiences raised questions in my mind, “What is it actually in English pronunciation? Why is it so difficult for Indonesian students? What could we do to teach them correct pronunciation of English words?” This paper will explain some principles behind the problems and proposed some ways of handling the English pronunciation mystery in the context of TEFL.

The English Sound Systems

Studying and understanding the speech sound of human language is the domain of phonetics and phonology. Phonetics is defined as “scientific study of speech production” (MacMahon, 2006: 359). It concern with (a) articulatory phonetics (how sounds are made or produced), (b) auditory phonetics (how the sounds are perceived by the listener’s ears), and (c) acoustic phonetics (the physics involved in the perception of the sounds) (Davenport & Hannahs, 2005: 2). In short, phonetics is chiefly concerned with the physical nature of speech sounds.

Phonology is defined as “… the language-specific selection and organization of sounds to signal meanings” (McMahon, 2002: 2). As it is language-specific, sound systems of any languages are likely to be different. Taking the English sound from the Indonesian perspectives, then we can see that the specifications of the English sounds are really obvious. Borrowing the jargon of Microsoft Office- “what you see is what you get” (wysiwyg), the Indonesian language is more or less “what you see is what you say”. However, it is not the case of the English language. Very rarely that we pronounce English word as it is written. In English, each letter does not represent a sound, and English words are not formed by reading out letters (Fraser, 2011: 585). Most words are pronounced differently from how they are written. For example “cite” which is pronounced /sait/ rather than /ˈsaiˈt/. There are many uncertainties and ambiguities in the English sound systems. English has “many sounds to one spelling and many spellings to one sound” (McMahon, 2002: 7). For example, the words “cut”, “put”, “turn”, and “sure”. Although the four words are spelled with the same “u”, they have four different sounds of /ʌ/, /ʌ/, /ə/, and /ə/ respectively. On the other hand, the words “bus”, “enough”, “glove”, and “wonder” have the same vowel sound of /ʌ/ though they are spelled differently. Despite these multiple ambiguities, attempts are regularly made to indicate pronunciations using the spelling system, but none are wholly successful (McMahon,
In fact, academic prediction of the sound based on the spelling may be made by advanced learners of English. However, there is no guarantee for correct pronunciation. What frequently happens is that incorrect pronunciation is likely to happen. Indeed, the English language does not have a regular system of correspondence between letters and sounds (Irujo, 2007).

The condition is made even worse with the fact that among English native speakers, they have the so-called variant. MacMahon (2006: 359) confirms that English is spoken in a wide variety of accents and pronunciation based on social and regional criteria. In the UK, the most fully described accent is Received Pronunciation (RP). Meanwhile, in the USA, the majority pronunciation is General American (GA). Further, MacMahon (2002: 57) gives the example of the word “tomato” which is pronounced by Southern British English speakers as /ˈtoʊmətəʊ/ and /ˈtoʊmətəʊ/ by North American speakers. This example clarifies that these group of speakers produce the same lexical item with consistently different vowels, and that the two different pronunciations show that the speakers are from different areas. Though this pronunciation difference does not interfere meaning, the variation does make sounding of English words is even more difficult and confusing to many Indonesian students and teachers.

The sound and spelling systems of English is very unique compare to that of the Indonesian. Considering the significant roles of English in today’s communication and the more important place the Indonesian government put English in the curriculum, the teaching and learning of English should be improved as well. In terms of phonics, phonetics, and phonology of English, it is of no doubt that the knowledge of them is also becoming more important. The English sound and spelling systems should become the concern of Indonesian students and teachers as English is usually the one foreign language they study or teach.

As mentioned earlier, many English teachers are still make unnecessary pronunciation errors in their classroom teaching. To my observation, the following three cases frequently take place. First is the case of letter “i”. In most cases, words in English which has letter “i” in them, the letter “i” is generally pronounced as /ɪ/. However, many students and teachers tend to pronounce this sound as /ɪ/. Words like “sick”, “sit”, “hit”, “bit” are pronounced incorrectly as /sɪk/, /sɪt/, /hɪt/, and /bɪt/; while the correct way should be /sɪk/, /sɪt/, /hɪt/, and /bɪt/. Second is the case of silent letters. There are many English words which have certain letters and these letters are not pronounced. For example, the letter “k” in the word “knowledge”, the letter “c” after “g” in the word “vegetable”, and the letter “w” at the beginning of the word “writing”. It is very common that English students and teachers pronounce the words as /ˈnoʊlɪdʒ/, /ˈvedʒtəbəl/, and /ˈwraɪtɪŋ/; while the correct way should be /ˈnoʊlɪdʒ/, /ˈvedʒtəbəl/, and /ˈrɛɪtɪŋ/. Third is the case of homophones. Teachers seem not to accept different English words with different spellings to have the same sounds. For example, the word “flower” and “flour” which are homophones. Many teachers tend to pronounce the latter as /ˈflaʊə(r)/ instead of /ˈflaʊə(r)/ since it is spelled differently and it carries different meaning. Many teachers still do not aware of homophones. Factors leading to these problems, according to Lanpher (n.d) are lack of knowledge in phonics, phonology and phonetics of English.

The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

The advance of foreign language teaching approach makes the Indonesian curriculum apply communicative language approach in the teaching and learning of English. To one extent this approach is good that it puts the language as a means of communication. Students are taught and train to use the language in as a real context as possible. The approach tends to focus more on macro skills and somewhat puts aside the micro skills of the language. As a result, with regard to pronunciation, phonetics, and phonology, they were largely dropped from teacher education and from the English classes at schools (Fraser, 2011: 589).

In the context of TEFL, it is a good idea to introduce English sounds as early as possible. As Walter noted that, introducing sounds discrimination, word pronunciation and sound-letter connection should begin early (1997: 141). At the very young age, students at elementary schools should be exposed to English letters and sounds. It is much easier to introduce sound systems to children as children usually simply copying what they hear, and building up mental generalizations based on their experiences through the amazing Language Acquisition Device (McMahon, 2002: 14). Meanwhile, for older students, it is likely that they will experience difficulties if not taught by using explicit or direct instruction.

Explicit Instruction and Audio Lingual Method

Explicit instruction refers to teacher-centered instruction that is focused on clear behavioral and cognitive goals and outcomes (Luke, 2013). Initially, it is often associated with the teaching of basic skills in early literacy and numeracy education. However, today it is expanding to other curriculum areas. It is based on behaviorist approach in which drill and practice dominates the teaching and learning activities. With explicit instruction, it is possible that students will be exposed systematically to words before they learn spelling, spelling before learning phonemes, phonemes before allophones, and allophones before phonetics and phonology (Fraser, 2011: 589-590). The same thing happens to the Audio Lingual Method. Minimal pair is a
good model for spelling and sound practices. Students are supposed to be exposed as frequently as possible to a different lexical of which one sound is different. For example, “bat – mat”, “sad – dad”, “dig – big”, etc.

The problem is that not many English teachers are confident enough with their own knowledge and skill of English sound systems and pronunciation. In this case, modeling from native speaker’s voice through recorded audio or video could be a logical choice and solution as access to native English sound is very limited. The advancement of information and communication technology also makes this possible as students and teachers can take great advantage of resources from the Internet and learning to listen and read phonics transcription from a standard electronic English dictionary with sound. At the pre-service teacher education, courses on English sound systems, phonetics, and phonology should be strengthened. Pronunciation classes should be given emphasis so that when the student teachers graduate later, they can be good models for their students in learning English as a foreign language. Again, with the reference to communicative approach, this micro skill of English tends to be neglected as quite many teacher educators think that their students will learn sound systems and pronunciation of English indirectly through listening to and speaking with their lecturers. To a great extent, this assumption is incorrect.

In conclusion, there is no shortcut to understand and master English phonics, phonology, and phonetics rather than studying and practicing them a lot. Students and teachers may learn by imitating the native speaker’s voice available through recorded audio-video media or referring to phonetic transcription of words available in standard dictionary. In order to learn the language English well, learners must prioritize the learning of pronunciation of English in all its dimensions namely phonics, phonology and phonetics in the first place. Pre-service English teachers should be educated and trained well in this area. Thus, the knowledge of phonetics and phonology will make English language learners and teachers have good command of English.

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References