

Language Reading and Its Implications on Learners' Pronunciation: a Case Study of a Pakistani school in Oman

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Abstract

Pakistani schools in Sultanate of Oman use the whole word approach in the practices of English language reading instructions and lack phonetics' knowledge of. Regardless, whether the approach is practical or not, teaching reading skills through these practices at an early age is questionable. This paper will focus on observation and evaluation as research tools, and will concentrate on a phonetics and a phonological analysis of a first -grade learner as a case study. The learner's reading of a text is compared with the reading of a native speaker. The focus of the paper is on two main characteristics of pronunciation; segmental and super-segmental. The analysis demonstrates a significant variation in speech sounds of the learner. The training opportunities in spoken language and reading skills for the teachers may fix the problem.

Keywords: phonetics and phonology, segmental and super-segmental, International Phonetic Alphabet, Pakistani school, instructions, sounds, pronunciation

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The Pakistani School known as Pakistani School Nizwa in Sultanate of Oman adopt the whole word approachⁱ in teaching reading in the English language. The same method is also practiced in Pakistan, as pointed out by Shamim (2008). The learners learn to read before they have learned any spoken English. Moreover, students learn the first letters of the alphabet, and then each alphabet letter is arbitrarily illustrated into words, mostly through the help of pictures. In this way, the learners become sight-readers and associate words with a concept, an image, or guess words. This reading method limits students' abilities to recognize the phonemes in words because English has only 26 letters representing the 44 soundsⁱⁱ. Adams (1990) shows that every spoken word contains a chain of little elements called phonemes and that the letters just represent these phonemes. Moreover, spoken Language centers on phonemes, which later become the IPAⁱⁱⁱ. Research has indicated that teachers and advanced learners should know English pronunciation through individual symbols rather than letters because of the fickle nature of English language spelling. Moreover, most British English dictionaries use IPA symbols to transcribe pronunciation, as stated by Roach (2000). English language reading instructions at the Pakistani school do not provide children with phonetics and phonology instruction. Moates (1998) indicates such teaching methods visibly lack "the awareness of English language sound system" (p.4).

That is to say; children do not learn phonemes, syllables, stress, and intonation. Moreover, teachers are trained only in the whole word approach and do not know about phonetics. Textbooks in use are not research-based.

Are the whole word method of early reading teaching and learning effective in sharpening young learners reading skills?

The objective of this study is to conduct a phonetics and phonological analysis of a first-grade learner as a case study^{iv} to find out whether the method of teaching reading in early years of education used in the schools affects students' overall reading performance. This case study evaluates the pronunciation of the young learner's reading of a text taken from an English language textbook. The detailed book is in Appendix one, and the digital audio recording of the student's reading performance. The analysis also compares the boy's performance with a native speaker's reading of the same book (attached in the digital file-^v

The study is significant because it will shed light on of the teaching and learning of early reading skills. It will also study the methods used and will recommend suggestions to improve the quality of reading skills.

The focus of the paper is on two main characteristics of pronunciation features: segmental and super-segmental. These segmental features are compared with the Received Pronunciation Model^{vi}.

The rest of the paper includes the following: Section two consists of a literature review, Section three contains a methodology, section four comprises an analysis of the learners' reading of the text, and Section five consists of the conclusion and policy recommendations.

Literature Review

Scarborough and Brady (2002) have claimed that English speakers learn the language unconsciously in their environment. Moreover, the teaching of reading in their schooling system goes through two stages. The pre alphabetic stage, where children practice the phonemes orally, and then the alphabetic stage in which they learn to relate sounds to letters. In many EFL contexts, learners do not have opportunities to learn about phonemes. This incompleteness in instruction creates unskillful readers. Rodgers (2006) states that phonetics, and phonology instruction is very important. He adds that the students who have not learned to read English through a linguistic approach generally develop some deficiencies of poor spelling, mispronunciation of words, and difficulty remembering new words. Snow and Fillmore (2000) point out that English has four percent of uncommon words, and phonetics and phonology instructions help second English learners reflect on the differences in pronunciation of different irregular words, break them into syllables or morphemes and also pronounce them correctly. Ehri (2000) presented in her study evidence that shows that first graders who went through English language sound system instruction in lower and upper kindergarten read accurately and with a more pleasant accent than those who studied through the whole word method. Adams (1990) has emphasized the importance of learning speech sounds, and aspects of speech sound in very playful ways, such as nursery rhymes and phonemic games rather than drills.

To briefly deal with the question of accents, many researchers, such as Pennington (1996), suggest the teaching of a variationist model which will allow learners to experience a diversity of accents, while others like Roach (2000) advocate the learning of the Received Pronunciation (RP) Model of English. Moreover, many scholars have supported the RP model and argue that it is an appropriate model that helps develop effective communication with all native English language speakers.

In Pakistani government-run schools, where the whole preschool to 12 levels of education use only the ministry of education designed textbooks, the curriculum does not include instructions in phonetics and phonology. Despite the efforts of successive governments to reform the curriculum (see Halai, 2001; Rahman, 2004; Wazir, 2004), current material hampers good reading and burdens secondary level teachers^{vii}. Warwick and Reimers (1995) explain the falling standards of teaching English in Pakistan^{viii}. There are 56 Phonemes^{ix} in Urdu compared to 44 in English, and English language teaching needs to focus on training teachers to know both Urdu and English phonology.

Methodology

A case study approach is applied to conduct a phonetics and phonological analysis of a first - grade learner. The subject is a Pakistani first -grader boy of seven years whose native language is Sindhi and, his schooling languages are Urdu and English. The case study evaluates the pronunciation of the boy's reading of a text taken from an English language textbook). The detailed text attachment is in Appendix one, and the digital audio recording of his reading performance of the book. The analysis also compares the learner's performance with a native speaker's reading of the same book (attached in the digital file-^x). The case study provides an in-depth understanding of the learner's variation and deviations from the standard comparable native practices. The informed consent is secured from the school and parents to protect the identity and privacy of the subject's volunteer participation in the study.

Results and analysis

Analysis of a First Grade Learner's Phonetics and Phonology

The digital recording of the text performed by the first- grader indicates many deviations at the segmental and super segmental levels. The segmental level has included the following features of the boy's performance: phonemic addition, phoneme omission, and phonemic substitution.

Regarding phonemic additions, the participant pronounced the word [fɑ:rm] as [fɑ:m], [bɑ:rn] as [bɑ:n], [wɔ:rmz] as [wɔ:mz] and [fɑ:rmər] as [fɑ:mə]. When, in these cases, the sound /r/ comes after the long vowel /ɑ:/, it creates a mispronunciation as compared with the RP model. Similarly, with the word (worms) [wɔ:rmz], he added the sound /r/ soon after the long vowel /ɔ:/. Roach (2000)^{xi}, has recognized this deviation and he has indicated that non -native speakers of English generally pronounce the sound /r/ after long vowels /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/. The complexity of the English language vowels system creates difficulty for Urdu learners. The English language vowel system is different from Urdu one. The tongue positioning for the long vowels in English poses problems for Urdu speakers because such positioning does not exist in Urdu, as mentioned by Mattews and Dalvi (2001).

In the final position of the words (farmer) and (tractor), the learner used another phonemic addition. The vowel /ə/, which is not a lax vowel,^{xii} has many variations. One of them is its effect on the approximant /r/. In the BBC/RP model accent, the approximant sound /r/ is silent if it occurs after all vowels, including /ə/. The participant added /r/ to the ending of the words (farmer) and (tractor). Thus he said [fɑ:mər] instead of [fɑ:mə] and [træktər] instead of [træktə]. Roach (2005) explained that generally, accents that have /r/ in the final position after vowels are called "rhetoric accents. The sound /r/ comes in the last part, but does not pronounce after vowels are called non – rhetoric accents. So, In the RP model, the accent is non-rhetoric, and the pronunciation of /r/ does not occur.

Some pronunciation deviation is visible where the participant substitutes a sound for a different one. The voiced fricative /θ/ in the syllable [θei] is replaced by the expressed fortis stop /d/ and creates the word (dey) instead of (they). Also, the short vowel /ə/ replaces the long vowel /ɜ:/ in the open weak syllable /θə/ and creates a strong syllable [θɜ:]. He also substituted the voiced nasal /ŋ/ for the articulated velar plosive /g/. Similar variation has taken place in the following cases:

- 1) The VCVC syllable [i:tiŋ] changed to the VCVCC syllable [i:ting]
- 2) The CVCVC syllable [bɑ:kiŋ] returned to the CVCVCC syllable [bɑ:king]
- 3) The CCVC syllable [pleiɪŋ] became the CCVCC syllable [pleijing].
- 4) The CVCVC syllable [lɔkiŋ] altered to the CVCVCC syllable [lɔking].
- 5) The CVC syllable [gəʊiŋ] is converted to the CVCC syllable [gəʊing]
- 6) The CCVCVC syllable [draiɪŋ] is replaced by the CCVCVCC syllable [draiving].

Giegerich (1992) recognizes the fact that the majority of non -native speakers of English have problems in pronouncing the sound /ŋ/. The first-grader does not seem to know that the

sound /ŋ/ is a different sound that has nothing to do with the sound /n/. Moreover, /ŋ/ occurs as an exception. This exception has to do with the fact that phonologically the sound /ŋ/ is restricted to the final position of words if morphologically preceded by the morphemes “k” and “g. The following terms: (barking) and (looking) are examples; for full details, see Roach (2000).

Finally, It may look at the phonemic omission. This type of phonemic error happens with only one syllable: the CCVSS (grass). The performer silenced the /r/, and he pronounced (grass) as [grɒs]; orthographically as (grass). Many studies have claimed that EFL learners' first language phonological characteristics interfere in their pronunciation of English. Burt (1975) also pointed out that “interference from a student's first language is the significant predictor of phonological errors. For instance, in Urdu, all vowels are fully pronounced. The performer addition of the sound /r/ after long vowels: [ɑ:r] and [ɔ:r], in other words, (farm) and (worm) is just a follow up of a phonological rule in his native language. First language performer interference is probably behind the performer substitution of the fricative /θ/ for /d/ because Urdu has no interdental fricatives. And for the last phonemic deviation, which was the phonemic omission, the performer omission of /r/ in (grass) has to do probably with his mother tongue non - allowance of such consonants combination.

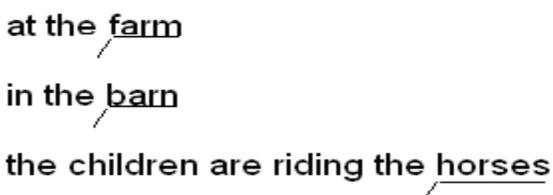
Supersegmentals Spheres

Supersegmentals aspects of the English sound system (rhythm, stress, and intonation) are different from the segmental elements (consonants and vowels). Stress depends on the speaker's application of additional force on a stressed syllable (Denham and Lobeck, 2010). While Roach (2000) suggests stress is an artificial feature in discourse “to analyze stress in individual words is artificial” (p. 94). However, for English language learners, it is vital to teach the stress by isolating the syllables and by categorizing words into nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, which helps in understanding the complexity that surrounds stress. The participant stressed the weak syllable [ðə/] and caused a deviation ['ðə]. Moreover, strong syllables such as (farm) ['fɑ:m] and (cows) [kaʊz] both have long vowels /ɑ:/ and /aʊ/, and have stress in the initial position. The participant stressed both the initial and the final part of the syllables. So farm ['fɑ:m] and cows' 'kaʊz] are pronounced: ['fɑ:'m] and ['kaʊ'z]. The performer seems to have problems with one syllable that ends in consonants and not those which end in vowels. The proper noun (Sami) has a syllable that contains a short vowel (a) / [sæ], and the second syllable has a long vowel (mi) [“mi:], which would make the stress on the second syllable of the word [sæ'mi:]. However, the participant emphasizes both syllables and pronounces the expression: ['sæ'mi:].

Another example is the performer's pronunciation of the word (fast). Since this adjective has one syllable, the stress occurs at the beginning, but the performer did on both the initial and the last position, making the word ['fæs't] instead of / 'fæst]. The initial stressed syllable in verbs is generally stressed if the final syllable is weak. But if the second syllable is strong, the stress then is applied to the second syllable. In the verbs “eating” and “barking,” the last syllables are weak and should not be stressed. The performer, however, stressed the initial and final syllables. So instead of ['i:tɪŋ], he says ['i:'tɪŋ]. And instead of ['bɑ:kiŋ] he says ['bɑ:'kiŋ]. Moats (2004) suggested that English as second/foreigner language teachers need knowledge on the roots and stems of words to master stress. The knowledge of term patterns may help the teachers to use stress in simple and in complex syllables. The above mentioned stress errors are small in number than the large number of stress errors produced by the performer.

Intonation rises narrowly and falls in pitch, as defined by Cauldwell and Hewings (1996). For non-native English speakers, intonation contributes to successful communication and correct reading of written texts. Along with intonation, people use facial expressions and gestures to express their feeling in spoken discourse. Intonation is very important to say language variations such as a question, irony, and classroom textbook reading.

The way the participant uses intonation suggests that his reading of the story is natural. However, in the recording, the tone was slightly higher at the end of each sentence. That, makes his reading of sentences lack clarity on intonation. Figure 1 illustrates the learner' use of intonation in the following extracts: "at the farm," "in the barn," and "the children are riding the horses".



at the farm
in the barn
the children are riding the horses

Figure 1. The student's intonation while reading

Conclusion and Recommendation

Many scholars have indicated that English phonology is very complex and those pronunciation problems cause EFL students' communication difficulties. Their accent gets unpleasant and hampers effective communication. I recommend the study of English language speech aspects before the stage of reading and spelling skills. The analysis of phonemes, syllables, and parts of speech of the first -grade learner attempted above demonstrates a significant variation in his speech sounds from a native speaker sounds. Observation has demonstrated that he misused stress in syllables, and his intonation lacks the flow that PR has. Students who have gone through the "whole word" method in reading English and who have limited access to spoken English tend to memorize words without considering for segmental and super-segmental pronunciation principles. Formal Teaching can either be improved, which will decrease the consequences of correct pronunciation in reading for foreign language learners. The solutions can be to train the teachers in linguistic education to sharpen skills in spoken English and structured reading instruction, language programs that set clear objectives towards spoken and written English, classroom practice that allows exposure to a vast amount of auditory input speaking proficiency, and practical reading instructions.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The method is also named “look and say,” “the whole language,” and “sight word,” as indicated by Adams et al. (1997) Moats, (1996), and Bergeron (1990).

ⁱⁱ Venezky (2003) has indicated that some dialects of English have more sounds than others.

ⁱⁱⁱ IPA is the abbreviation of International Phonetic Alphabets, a system for describing the sounds of language in which each symbol represents a sound, see, e.g., Denham and Lobeck (2010).

^{iv} The case study is about a Pakistani first-grader boy of 7 years whose native language is Sindhi, and his schooling languages are both Urdu and English.

^v The text audio transcript is available on request.

^{vi} Received Pronunciation (RP) Model is now considered the old fashioned name, replaced by BBC pronunciation Model, see Jones (1976), Trudgill (1999), Ladefoged (2000) and Roach (2000).

^{vii} Moats (2009) has made it clear those children who have not studied English sounds need intervention instructions in later levels.

^{viii} “They include unmotivated faculty and students; inactive principals; a curriculum divorced from the real problems faced in teaching; heavy reliance on lecturing, dictation, and rote memorization; cheating on examinations and a lack of supervision” (p. 22).

^{ix} For full details on English/ Urdu languages, phonemes, refer to Cunnings (1926), Glassman (1999), and Matthews and Dalvi (2001).

^x The text audio transcript is available on request.

^{xi} Roach (2000), points out that (BBC) accent is a non –rhotic accent because the sound /r/ only pronounced before vowels and not after them.

^{xii} Lax is a term used in phonology by a few researchers to refer to short vowels, Roach (2000). The term denotes energy and force in verbalizations (Roach, 2000).

Appendix A

TEXT- At the Farm (Adopted from Horsburgh, 2008, p. 20)

It is Sunday. The children are on the farm.

Sami and Nida are riding the horses.

They are going slowly.

Maryam is playing with the kittens.

The cows are in the barn. They are eating grass.

The chickens are eating the worms.

The dog is barking at the cat.

The lambs are playing in the field.

The farmer is driving the tractor. The tractor is going fast.

The text transcription:

[ət ðə 'fɑ: m]

[ɪt ɪz sʌn'deɪ ðə 'tʃɪldrən ɑ: ət ðə 'fɑ: m]

[sæ'mi: ən 'ni:də ɑ: 'raɪdɪŋ ðə 'hɔ:səz]

['ðeɪ ɑ: 'gəʊŋ s'ləʊli]

[me'ɾjæm ɪz p'leɪɪŋ 'wɪð ðə 'kɪtənz]

[ðə 'kaʊz ɑ: ɪn ðə 'bɑ:n. 'ðeɪ ɑ: 'i:tɪŋ 'græs]

[ðə 'tʃɪkənz ɑ: 'i:tɪŋ ðə 'wɔ:mz]

[ðə 'dɒgz ɑ: 'bɑ:kɪŋ ət ðə 'kæt]

[ðə 'læms ɑ: p'leɪɪŋ ɪn ðə 'fi:ld]

[ðə 'fɑ:mər ɪz d'raɪvɪŋ ðə 'træktə ðə 'træktə ɪz 'gəʊɪŋ fæst]