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A STUDY ON THE GENDER VARIATIONS IN ESL PRONUNCIATION

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is an integral part of language learning since it directly affects learners' communicative competence as well as performance. There are various factors that affect the teaching and learning process of pronunciation. As a part of the study on the factors affecting pronunciation acquisition, it was noted that gender too seemed to play a role in the variation of the sounds. Hence this study was attempted to bring out the variations in the sounds found when learning English as second language.

KEYWORDS: Pronunciation, ESL, Gender Variations, Phonology

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds. The habit of producing a sound is acquired by repeating it over and over again and by being corrected when it is pronounced wrongly. Learning to pronounce a second language means building up new pronunciation habits and overcoming the bias of the first language (Cook, 1996). Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning. It includes attention to the particular sounds of a language (segmental aspects), aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm (suprasegmental aspects), how the voice is projected (voice quality) and, in its broadest definition, attention to gestures and expressions that are closely related to the way we speak a language.

Gender has always been a central concern in studies into second language variation and continues to be a much debated, and often controversial, theme. Early variationist research seemed to point to a consistent pattern of gender differences, summed up by Labov (2001) thus:

Perhaps the broadest and most widely instantiated sociolinguistic generalization concerns the careful behavior of women with stable sociolinguistic variables. It can be stated as Principle 2, the linguistic conformity of women: For stable sociolinguistic variables, women show a lower rate of stigmatized variants and a higher rate of prestige variants than men. (Labov, 2001:266)

Though this study and other studies point out how there are variations mostly with that of pitching rather than the articulation of the sounds. Hence the current hypothesis has been framed on account of the articulation of English sounds.

ANALYSIS OF VARIATIONS IN THE SOUNDS

The hypothesis that there would not be significant differences in the pronunciation pattern was the formed on the basis that gender would not have any role in how a particular word is pronounced. The human sound system has no varying difference in sound production according to gender, hence this hypothesis was framed. It was observed during

analysis, that there were three sets of words where there was significant difference in the manner of articulation when gender was compared. The sets of the words made to pronounce were:

Table 1: Word List

	Word	Expected Script
Set -1	election	/ilekʃn/
	electric	/ilektrik/
Set -2	spectacular	/spektækjulə/
	spectator	/spekteitə/
Set -3	puncture	/pʌŋkʧə/
	punctual	/pʌŋkʧuə1/

The word list as shown in the table above was a part of the questionnaire, which the trainees had to pronounce loud. The produced sound was later transcribed into phonetic script for the purpose of analysis. From the analysis, it was so found that there were major differences in the pronunciation pattern between the genders.

Table 2: Word List of Table 1 Analysed

Received Sound Transcript								
Set-1	/elekʃən/		/əleʃʌn/		/elektrik/		/eletrik/	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
CBE	5.88235*	65.4135	94.1176	31.5789	5.88235	70.6767	94.1176	19.54887
EKM	0	89.344	100	1.6393	7.1429	79.508	92.857	20.4918
Set -2	/spektækjular/		/spetækular/		/spekteitər/		/speteitar/	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
CBE	5.88235	89.4737	94.1176	10.5263	5.88235	80.4511	94.1176	5.263158
EKM	0	98.361	100	1.6393	7.1429	96.721	75	0.81967
Set -3	/pandʒar/		/pʌnktʃar/		/pandʒuel/		/pantʃuel/	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
CBE	94.118	8.2707	5.8824	84.211	0	65.414	100	34.5865
EKM	100	19.672	0	80.328	100	81.148	0	13.1148

*numbers are in percentage

This table shows the result of the analysis of the set of sounds from the word list given to be pronounced loud. This shows that the all the words from the three sets the male teacher trainees have the majority of the incorrect sounds when compared to the girls. Set- 1 has 94% of male members from Coimbatore and 100% from Ernakulam districts mispronouncing the word 'election'. Instead of /ilekʃn/ which was the expected pronunciation, a majority of them had given /eleʃen/, where the [k] sound had been omitted.

From the set of words, it has been noted that the velar plosive sound of [k]is conveniently dropped when it occurs in the medial position of utterance. The girls almost have them correct except for 10.5% from Coimbatore and 1.63% from Ernakulam who have them wrong.

The word 'punctual' pronounced as /pʌŋktʃuə1/had the most number of incorrect pronunciations. Majority of the teacher trainees irrespective of their gender believed that the [k] sound is silent in the pronunciation of the word, hence the reason for the word being highly mispronounced. Another difference observed is usage of the voiced sound [ʤ] over the voiceless sound [ʧ] in the word 'punctual'. 100% of the male teacher trainees from Ernakulam district used the voiced palate- alveolar affricate [ʤ] instead of the voices palate- alveolar [ʧ]. The reason for this is seen because of the preceding nasal which has to be a velar [ŋ] but alveolar [n] is used instead. Hence the movement from the alveolar to the palato – alveolar seems to be smooth rather than opting for the velar nasal. On the other hand the girls have been more careful with the pronunciation of the sounds.

In the three sets of sounds where there were notable differences the girls have given a near or perfect pronunciation of the sounds of the words in comparison to the boys. Hence it can be said that there is a difference in the pronunciation of the words depending on the gender.

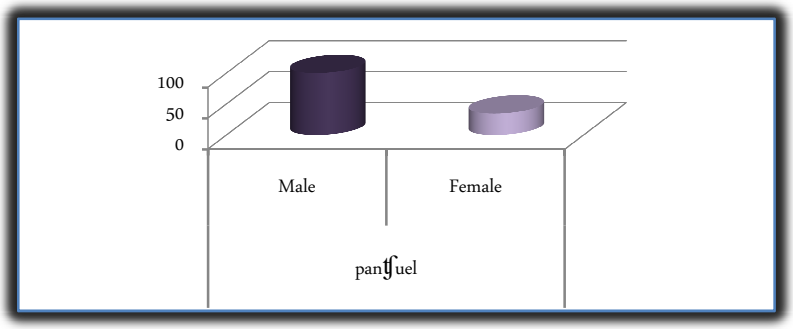

Figure 1: Result of the Analysis of the Word 'Punctual'

As seen in the figure 1 the entire male population of the study mispronounced the word. On the other hand, only 34% female teacher trainees had mispronounced the word. It was observed that though there was difference in the usage of the affricate sounds all the samples have dropped the semi vowel [j] sound that helps in the movement from the affricate to the mid [ə] vowel or schwa. Hence, it is observed that there is a total difference in the pronunciation.

It was also observed that female trainees have softer pronunciations for the schwa whereas the male counterparts use it longer as a separate sound in the word. For example for the word sudden /sʌdᵊn/ the schwa is represented as a superscript. The female trainees have been quite quick with their pronunciation of the words that the schwa has retained its position, but when the male trainees pronounce they do not retain the schwa and a separate sound

entity is formed making the word /sʌdən/.

Table 3: Schwa Mispronounced

Word	Expected Sound	Received Sound
Middle	/midᵊl/	/ midel/ , /midil/
Fiddle	/fidᵊl/	/fidel/,/fidil/
nursery	/nɜ:sᵊri/	/nʌrsari/, ne:rseri/

This table shows us the mispronounced words by the teacher trainees. Here too the majority of the male trainees have used these sounds whereas the female trainees have been more careful with their pronunciation.

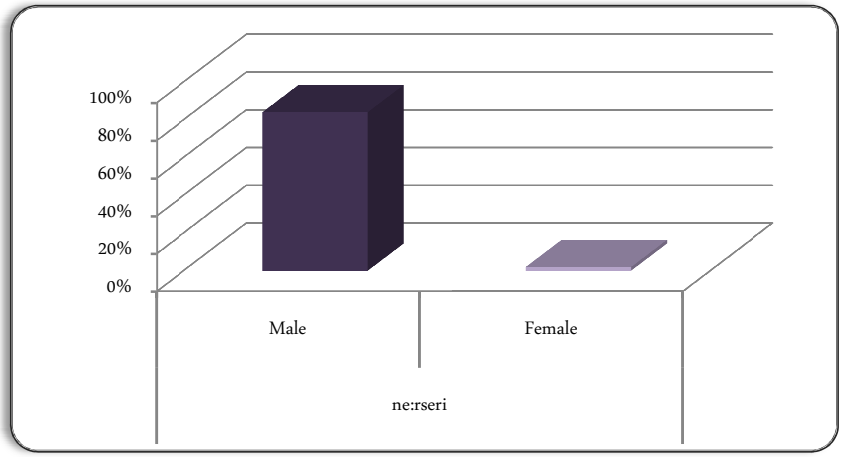

Figure 2: Schwa Analysed in the Word 'Nursery'

The figure 2 gives a clear picture of how 85% of the male population have included the /ə/ when it can be refrained from pronouncing. Though this does not fall under mispronunciation, it can be observed as a difference in the pronunciation patterns between the genders.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on these findings that were identified, it can be observed that there are considerable differences in the utterances of the sounds and words based on gender. This finding would make its way into more research to scientifically analyse the reasons for the variations of sounds in pronunciation.

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