AN ANALYSIS OF PRONUNCIATION LEARNING STRATEGIES OF RURAL MALAY ESL LEARNERS

BY

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Teaching of English as a Second Language)

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is an important aspect of language that needs to be taught in classroom, yet this aspect of language is often given little attention and it is one of the most difficult problems to be handled. Therefore, there is a need for the students to find their own pronunciation learning strategies so that they will be able to help themselves in learning correct pronunciation that leads to an intelligible and comprehensible communication. The objective of this study was to identify pronunciation learning strategies reportedly used by ESL learners and to observe if ten selected strategies were used in spontaneous pronunciation. The data were collected reportedly using a set of pronunciation learning strategies questionnaires, observation and an interview with pronunciation samples elicited from a group of thirty-four Form four ESL learners. Results from the questionnaire data showed that learners from rural areas tend to avoid using the target language in terms of pronouncing or speaking. This conclusion was made based on high percentages of the students who preferred the input-pronunciation strategies compared to the output-pronunciation strategies. The observation data showed that the students actually used a number of output-pronunciation strategies, for example, "I speak and read slower" and "immediate self-correction" to complete the tasks given to them. However, "willing to guess" (input-pronunciation strategy) is still the most used strategy. The interview results showed that the students did agree that they mostly used "guessing" strategies (input-pronunciation strategies) in obtaining new information. The researcher found that there was no discrepancy between the strategies reportedly used by the students and their actual use of the pronunciation strategies in the given pronunciation tasks. The low percentages of output-pronunciation learning strategies usage compared to input-pronunciation strategies are worrying since this could mean that the students are not able to speak in the target language correctly.

خلاصة البحث

يُعدُّ النطقُ عنصراً مهماً من عناصر اللغة التي يجب تدريسها في الفصل، ولكن دائماً ما يتم إعطاء هذا الجانب من اللغة قليلاً من الاهتمام، رغم أنها إحدى أهمِّ المهارات التي يتعين معالجتها. لذا تظهر حاجة الطلاب لإيجاد استراتيجية تعينهم على تعلُّم النطق الصحيح مِّا يمكنهم من التواصل ونقل المعلومات بصورة واضحة ومفهومة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد استراتيجية تعلُّم النطق المستخدمة من قبل متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية، ومراقبة نطق المتعلمين التلقائي للغة في عشرة استراتيجيات مختارة. وقد تم جمع البيانات باستخدام عدد من استبانات استراتيجيات تعلّم النطق، وتمّ استخدام الملاحظة، وتم كذلك استخدام المقابلة مع عيّنة قوامها 34 طالباً، وأُخذتْ العيّنة من طلاب المرحلة الثانوية، السنة الثانية متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية. وقد أظهرتْ نتائج الاستبيان أنّ متعلمي الإنجليزية من المناطق الريفية يميلون إلى تجنب استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية في المحادثة. وقد تم الوصول إلى هذه النتيجة بناء على نسبة الطلاب العالية الذين يفضلون استخدام استراتيجيات النطق المكتسبة، مقارنةً باستراتيجيات النطق المُتعلمة التي أظهرها الاستبيان. وأظهرت أداة الملاحظة أنّ الطلاب استخدموا عدداً من استراتيجيات النطق المُتعلمة، فعلى سبيل المثال "الكلام والقراءة بصورة بطيئة"، واستخدام استراتيجية "التصحيح الذاتي المباشر" في إنجاز المهام الموكلة إليهم. ومع ذلك فإنّ استراتيجية "الاستعداد للتخمين" تُعدُّ من أكثر استراتيجيات النطق المكتسبة، وأظهرتْ نتائج المقابلة كذلك أن الطلاب يُوافقون على أن "استراتيجية التخمين" هي الاستراتيجية الأكثر استخداماً في الحصول على المعلومات الجديدة. ووجدتْ الباحثة أنه لا يوجد فرق بين الاستراتيجيات التي جاءت في التقارير، والاستراتيجيات التي استخدمها الطلاب في المهام النطقية التي أُوكلتْ إليهم. وجاءت نسبة استراتيجيات النطق المُتعلمة منخفضةَ مقارنة بنسبة استراتيجيات النطق المكتسبة، مِّا يُشير إلى أن الطلاب غير قادرين على التحدث بالإنجليزية بصورة صحيحة، مِّا يدعو إلى القلق.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Teaching of English as a Second Language)

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Zahariah Pilus
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (Teaching of English as a Second Language)

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Dean, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Nur Hazwani Hanafi

Signature …………………   Date ………………

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1   BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Numerous statements about acquiring and mastering English as a second language are usually about the ability to master the four basic language skills which are reading, writing, listening and speaking. According to Brown (2000), in order to master English language, learners have to be adequately exposed to all of the four skills which are the receptive (listening and reading) and productive (writing and speaking) skills. In addition to the speaking skill, there is another sub-category that should be highlighted which is the pronunciation skill. This skill is crucial in ensuring that there is no minor communication breakdown occurring in speech. Yet, pronunciation is the least taught in school (Derwing, Thomson & Munro, 2008). Because of this, the issues of teaching and learning pronunciation of English language have attracted the attention of linguists and educationists.

According to Fulcher (2003), pronunciation is defined as "the outer manifestation of speech which created sounds" (p. 25). Beebe (1978) in her study stated that "… the very act of pronouncing is not just the words we transmit, but is an essential part of what we communicate about ourselves as people" (p. 3).

These statements suggest that pronunciation is an aspect of language which is worth studying since it connotes speaker's identity and intended messages to be conveyed. That is why educators and scholars agree that pronunciation learning is an important aspect of second language (L2) acquisition (Trofimovich & Gatbonton, 2006).

The spread of English has resulted in the rapid growth in the number of non-native speakers who possess varying degrees of proficiency in the language. For this reason, a distinctive English pronunciation has developed as a result of the influence of different linguistic and background of the speakers. The differences in the way people pronounce words can impede communication. In terms of second language acquisition, Brown (1991: 1) stresses that "poor pronunciation represents a considerable barrier to learner's success in English". Often, productions of the learner that do not match the intended target speech production (be it comprehensibility or native-like accuracy), are considered mispronunciations (Eckstein, 2010). Thus, intelligible pronunciation plays an important role for L2 learners in view of the fact that unintelligible pronunciation prevents even those with a large vocabulary and grammar from successful communication with L1 speakers.

In addition, Goodwin (2001) stresses that L2 proficiency is most likely judged through the speakers' pronunciation. Thus, it is very important for second language (L2) learners to pronounce words correctly to achieve efficient communication. In Malaysia, pronunciation skill is crucial to the educational system where it is stated that one of the aims of teaching and learning English in Malaysia is "to teach children (students) in such a way that they will be understood not only by fellow Malaysians but also by speakers of English from other parts of the world" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1971). To support this statement, The Second Outline perspective Plan (1991-2000) also stressed the development of communication skills in a second language which states that Malaysians should be well equipped with a strong base in education and training, including the ability to communicate in a second language, which is English, the international language of commerce (Jamaliah Mohd Ali, 2000).

Although it is indisputable that pronunciation is an important aspect of language to be studied and taught, this aspect of language is often given little attention, if not entirely ignored by the teachers in classroom. One of the reasons for lack of focus in pronunciation teaching is that "teachers' lack of skills and confidence to tackle pronunciation in class" (Derwig and Rossitier, 2002). Teachers seem to face difficulties in being the model themselves and the majority of English teachers would be reluctant to speak in the classroom with a native-like pronunciation model. For them, the students are able to learn pronunciation on their own outside the classroom setting.

In support of the teachers' views, Purcell and Sutter (1980: 12) maintained that "teachers and classroom have remarkably little to do with how well our students speak English". This is fully supported by Wong (1986) who stated that "pronunciation instruction cannot realistically shape students' speech to become English-like; it can only provide students with the tools to do so, if they want to" (p.19). Munro and Derwig (1997), in their study, concluded that a language instructor can have very little impact on student's accuracy. These seem to suggest that there are other factors which require learners to improve their pronunciation to become intelligible, given that teachers and classroom instructions are not the only tools to help them acquire correct pronunciation.

Therefore, in order to satisfy this need to aid learners in pronunciation learning, there is a need for students to find their own pronunciation learning strategies so that they will be able to help themselves in learning correct pronunciation that leads to an intelligible and comprehensible communication.

1.2   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Malaysia, English which is patterned based on Received Pronunciation (RP) model is taught as early as the time when students enter primary school. This formal learning process continues till they are in the secondary school. This implies that the students had been in the English-instruction system and environment for 11 years. Nevertheless, rural students' performance is below the level of expectation whereby they tend to perform poorly in English language and the pronunciation issue is the most difficult problem to be handled. As stated by Rosli and Malachi (1990), urban school learners were more proficient and better in the speaking skill than their rural counterparts. This can be attributed to the following reasons;

Firstly, as stated by Lim (1994) the possible cause for low spoken English proficiency in the rural area is the result of the widespread use of Malay language in teacher-talk. Secondly, rural students come from input-poor language environment. David and Naji (2000) and David and Nambiar (2001) mention that these rural students come from an English as a foreign language setting and start school with hardly any knowledge of English. English is not used on a daily basis and learners cannot have regular access to real-life communication with speakers of English. Because of this, the intelligibility and comprehensibility of their utterances are compromised. Moreover, second language (L2) learners "are unable to identify when their pronunciation is not target-like and do not notice relevant L1 features in native speakers' speech, though they know their speech differs from target L1 production" (Ingels, 2010: 68).

1.3   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine pronunciation learning strategies as reported by the students.

2. To compare the strategies used by the students of different English grades.

3. To observe pronunciation learning strategies used by students in pronunciation tasks (reading passage and pronouncing minimal-pairs tasks).

1.4   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the pronunciation learning strategies reportedly used by the students?

2. Do students with different English grades use the same or different pronunciation learning strategies?

3. What are the pronunciation learning strategies used by students in pronunciation tasks?

1.5   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Not many studies on teaching and learning pronunciation have been carried out in Malaysia. In fact, pronunciation learning and teaching have not been the main concern in most language learning settings. Therefore, the need to understand and evaluate students' performances in English pronunciation is the main concern in this study given that the findings will help teachers understand and know the strategies employed by the students in learning better pronunciation.

Since rural students are less exposed to English usage in their learning and environment, this study will contribute to the evaluation of students' pronunciation learning strategies in such environment to make them aware of their learning

weaknesses so that they may take efficient actions to improve their pronunciation learning. Next, it is crucial for this study to be conducted so that problems faced by rural students will be explained. Therefore, there is a need to conduct this study in order to find ways for these rural area students to perform better in their English language subject and to be able to speak well in their daily communication.

1.6   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Only thirty-four students were studied for this research. Thus, the results obtained cannot be used to generalize the pronunciation learning strategies used by other form four students who were not involved in the research.

2. The students' ability to use more pronunciation learning strategies was also limited. The passage-reading task given to the students in this study was short. Thus, the chance to use more pronunciation learning strategies was limited.

1.7   CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Pronunciation

According to Fulcher (2003: 25) pronunciation is defined as "the outer manifestation of speech which created sounds".

Learning strategies

According to Oxford (1990: 18) "...language learning strategies (LLS) are defined as specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills"

Pronunciation learning strategies

Pronunciation learning strategies in this paper will be defined as specific actions taken by the learner to make pronunciation learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, and more self-directed. For example, guessing new words, comparing a new word to the native language and so on. This study attempts to investigate learners' pronunciation learning strategies of getting comprehensible and intelligible pronunciation.

Rural students

Rural students in this study will refer to students living in rural area and who rarely use English in their daily conversation and only received and were exposed to English at school only during English subject and English is treated as a foreign language by the students.

Input

Input is language that learners are exposed to. Input needs to be or can be understood by learners.

Output

It is the language produced by the learner. In this paper it will also be defined as a way of practicing or a gained strategy which does not necessarily entail the end product.

Comprehensibility

It is defined as "how difficult or easy an utterance is to be understood" (Derwig & Munro, 1997: 2)

Intelligibility

Munro and Derwing (2006) defined intelligibility as "how much a listener actually understands" (p. 521).

1.8   ORGANIZATION OF THESIS

The thesis is arranged into five chapters including this chapter. Chapter two highlights the literature relevant to language learning strategies, followed by current research on pronunciation learning in general, supported by numerous summary of research on pronunciation learning strategies, further clarification of literature by finding the research gaps and present study's strength. This chapter also includes the learning theory of this study.

Chapter three covers the methodology used in the study. It includes a description of the research approach, the population and sampling design and the data collection procedure. Chapter four focuses on the analyses and results of the study. Finally, Chapter five presents the conclusion of the study and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the literature related to the investigation of pronunciation learning strategies. The discussions of this chapter are divided into different sub-topics; research on language learning strategies, research on pronunciation learning in general, research on pronunciation learning strategies, and the learning theory used in the present study.

2.2   LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Researchers have investigated several learning strategies in order to discover which strategies are most advantageous to second language (L2) acquisition. In order to address the issues pertaining to the use of learning strategies Oxford (1990) states that "...language learning strategies (LLS) are defined as specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills" (p. 18). These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. They are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability. In other words, learners cope with their learning by taking appropriate steps to overcome their learning difficulties. These appropriate steps that they employ in their learning process are known as strategies which help them to monitor their language learning process. We should note that language learning strategies (LLS) are different from learning styles, in which LLS refers to a learner's "natural, habitual, and preferred way(s) of

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absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills" (Reid, 1995). As for learning styles, Reid (1995) defined it as "characteristics of individuals for intake of understanding of new information". It is the learners' attribute related to their learning process.

There are a number of basic characteristics in the generally accepted view of LLS. First, LLS are learner generated which means that these are steps taken by language learners in helping them learn a language. Second, LLS enhance language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner's skills in listening, speaking, reading, or writing the L2. Third, LLS can be seen (behaviours, steps, techniques, etc.) or unseen (thoughts, mental processes). Fourth, LLS involve information and memory process (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc.) (Reid, 1995). All of the processes involved in LLS facilitate the learning of a second language. Oxford (1990: 9) stated that language learning strategies:

1. allow learners to become more self-directed
2. expand the role of language teachers
3. are problem-oriented
4. involve many aspects, not just the cognitive

Cohen (1990) insists that only conscious strategies are considered as LLS, and there must be a choice involved on the part of the learner. This means that learner is the one who chooses what kind of strategies he/she will use.

2.3   PRONUNCIATION   IN   CURRENT   LANGUAGE   ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Learning strategies have become an accepted part of second language teaching and learning when these strategies can be applied to the four major skills of Second

Language Acquisition (SLA): reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Nevertheless, there is still lack of research being conducted on pronunciation learning strategies area. Only recently have pronunciation learning strategies in particular emerged as a means of empowering language learners' need in achieving effective comprehensible communication (Derwig & Rossitier, 2002 and Eckstein, 2007). The lack of attention is the result of a number of issues arising from pronunciation area for example, there are hardly any guidelines given in assessing pronunciation and there is always a debate on the functionality of pronunciation as in the sense of in what way pronunciation should be evaluated. Should it be based on its comprehensibility, intelligibility, accuracy, or fluency?

There are many researchers, such as Elliott (1995) have noticed that "the acquisition of pronunciation has fallen to the wayside and has suffered from serious neglect in the communicative classroom" (p. 96) while Derwing and Rossiter (2002) note that learning strategy studies have not discussed pronunciation strategies. The application of learning strategies to pronunciation has gone unnoticed and not investigated as the result of lack of expertise and difficulty in teaching pronunciation.

Most of the studies conducted in pronunciation learning stress that it is important to have a perfect pronunciation. Researchers have identified what ESL students can do to make their pronunciation more native-like, yet specific suggestions can be confusing and burdensome to students, especially if teachers are not available to explain and model these suggestions.

Morley (1991) mentioned that the traditional goals of getting ESL students to strive for perfect or near native pronunciation should be changed to a more practical goal of "developing a functional intelligibility, communicability and the development of speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the

classroom" (p. 500). Therefore, pronunciation learning strategy training that allows students to self- monitor and self-correct their own speech is one of the keys to improve pronunciation among ESL learners.

2.4   PRONUNCIATION LEARNING STRATEGIES

There are only a few studies which have investigated pronunciation strategies, for example Ingels (2010), Eckstein (2007), Haslam (2010), Vitanova & Miller (2002), Derwing & Rossiter (2002), and Peterson (2000). These studies have yielded a thorough list of strategies with a variety of classifications. Yet, there remains much more to be studied and learned regarding the effect of these strategies on pronunciation learning gains both in and out of the classroom setting. The following is a summary of the types of pronunciation strategies that have been found.

Ingels (2010) studies the effects of self-monitoring strategy on the pronunciation learners of English. She aims to identify effective strategies for improving Second language (L2) pronunciation that learners could use independently in any learning environment. This study is a classroom-based study. It involves fifteen international graduate students at a United States university who were asked to produce a five minutes mini lecture. These participants were introduced to 16-weeks of pronunciation and self- monitoring instruction. After self-monitoring, participants orally produced the corrected version three times. Rehearsals were recorded and the first and third time recordings were analyzed. The result of this study indicated that the use of self- monitoring strategies increased pronunciation scores. In this study, it is proven that self-monitoring strategy on pronunciation helps the learners to learn better pronunciation.