



Pronunciation: A Significant Aspect of Vocabulary in English as Second Language Contexts

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Abstract: Vocabulary contributes to meaningful communication, and forms the premise to assess its impact in **English as Second Language (ESL)** situations. It has become *sine qua non* for people to develop the linguistic competence of English to succeed at every level, and acquire a certain level of proficiency in the skills of language, both major and ancillary. The major skills of language - Speaking, Reading, Writing, Listening- cannot be operational without vocabulary and grammar. The second language research identifies the need for vocabulary at all levels of education as at least 2000 words are essential to carry on a simple conversation, and 10000-word families are required for academic success.

However, in its spoken form, intelligibility of speech demands the speakers' ability to use words either in isolation, or in combination, with right pronunciation. In the ESL situation, this feature of vocabulary does not receive emphasis, thereby affecting the pronunciation. In addition, pronunciation - of both words and sentences - in the second language contexts is affected by the mother tongue interference, and needs to be addressed in the curriculum. This paper aims at exploring the pronunciation aspect of vocabulary, with respect to Indian/Telugu speakers, and its pedagogical implications to enable the learners use the target language intelligibly.

IndexTerms - English as Second Language (ESL), Second Language Learners (SLL), Aspects/features of vocabulary, Target Language, Mother Tongue Interference (MTI) Intelligible Communication, Learner Autonomy

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning of the vocabulary of English is particularly relevant for a second/foreign language learner; more so in India. India is a confluence of many States, each with its linguistic identity. The onslaught of globalization demands proficiency in the language skills by the learners, to succeed professionally. In this context, the productive skills – that is speaking and writing - acquire prominence as the Second Language Learners (SLL) need to be competent enough to articulate themselves in an effective manner.

Speaking is a productive skill and demands the use of words appropriately. For the SLL, it is a complex task, as both pronunciation and enunciation matter for success in oral communication. Spoken form of the word is associated with its pronunciation, denoting its articulation. Learning and using vocabulary are affected by this crucial feature, which is governed by its mechanics - stress, pitch, volume, and intonation, revealing the clarity of utterances of a speaker. These paralinguistic features are an associated form of vocabulary and have been identified as the most crucial in determining success in oral communication as observed by Scarcella and Oxford. (Richards, J. C & Renandya, W.A., 2010)

Learning vocabulary involves the knowledge of both the visual and oral form. Visual form caters to how the word appears, in terms of spelling, while the oral form caters to the mastery of a word in terms of its pronunciation. Further, pronunciation in vocabulary impart acquires significance as it helps in accurate communication, influences listening comprehension, builds confidence in speaking, and avoids misinterpretation of the meaning when words often confused are used in the process of communication.

Vocabulary knowledge is not ensured by merely knowing the meaning and usage of the words, but also by being aware of its phonological form, and how these features aid in effective communication. Hence, the knowledge of segmental (individual sounds) and the suprasegmental sounds (Stress, intonation, rhythm), associated with pronunciation of words are important in English as Second Language (ESL) situations.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Second language research highlights the significance of vocabulary that enables the skills of language to operate in an integrated manner, contributing to communicative competence. According to Hymes, communicative competence, rests on the

interaction of grammatical, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and probabilistic language components (Richards, J. C & Renandya, W.A., 2010).

In other words, the linguistic competence is at the very heart of communicative competence. Canale and Swain opine that the interrelation between all the competencies -- grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic -- enables the smooth flow of communication (Richards, J. C & Renandya, W.A., 2010). To develop these competencies, it is desirable for the Second Language Learners (SLL) to have an adequate repertoire that facilitates ease of communication. This is significant and contributory to learning a language as Morris identifies "For a language to operate efficiently there should be little conscious effort but rather the spontaneous use of word and forms," (Morris, I, 1954). Nation states that mastering a word involves the knowledge of the aspects of form, meaning, and use (Nation. I.S.P, 2001). Further emphasis by Wallace identifies the following different vocabulary aspects to be mastered by the learners:

To know a word and use it means the ability to -

- a) recognize it in its spoken or written forms;
- b) recall it at will;
- c) relate it to an appropriate object or concept;
- d) use it in appropriate grammatical form;
- e) in speech, pronounce it in a recognizable way;
- f) in writing, spell it correctly;
- g) use it with the words it correctly goes with i.e., in the correct collocation;
- h) use it at the appropriate level of formality; and,
- j) be aware of its connotations and associations. (Jordan, R.R, 1997)

Schmitt (2000) identifies that learning a word entails understanding its written and spoken forms, its grammatical colligations, and collocations along with the word associations; however, it begins with pronunciation as the primary input received.

III. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

In English as Second Language (ESL) context, learning a language in general, and its Vocabulary in specific is a challenging aspect, as identified by various researchers for the following reasons:

- Widdowson's perspective of the learners' ability to distinguish between form and meaning and the relation they share is enabled by lexical competence which includes the breadth – the vocabulary size, and the depth – the quality of vocabulary knowledge. Depth and breadth of words is essential for complete processing and networking of the newly learnt words. To facilitate Second Language Learners (SLL) develop depth and breadth of vocabulary, it is crucial to focus on all the key aspects of vocabulary, as mere instruction of the words does not ensure word knowledge.
- Spelling is yet another challenging aspect for ESL learners. Feigenbaum (1958) identifies the complexity in spelling is caused by the 251 orthographic representations of the 44 sounds of English. Owing to the aphonetic feature of English language, guessing the spelling is often dangerous as different orthographic combinations could produce the same sound and vice versa. (For example: in the words *receive*, *relieve*, *seen*, *scene* there is change in the spelling though the sound is the same. "C" is pronounced in three different ways in the words, "cycle, chemistry, change.")
- Upward classifies the learners' difficulties in recognizing the words arising of the redundancy into three categories:
 1. Silent letters - calm, castle, debt, know, receipt
 2. Unstressed vowel sounds after stressed syllables – e – in chapel, atom - o
 3. Double consonants – rubber, budding, summer, getting
- Spelling and pronunciation are interdependent as learners cultivate "spelling strategy from reliance on sound-symbol correspondence toward spelling an unknown word by analogy to a known word."
- Schmitt opines that the knowledge of spelling has been identified as an important factor in developing the vocabulary knowledge and it also contributes to language processing.
- Spellings are influenced by the pronunciation, and frequently result in difficulties in spellings for the SLL. If these are unaddressed at a very young stage, they get fossilized and the errors continue in written mode with wrong spellings. (Schmitt, 2000)

IV. PRONUNCIATION: A SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF VOCABULARY

Vocabulary has two major features:

- i. Concrete feature that consists of the spoken (Audio) and written (Visual) forms
- ii. Abstract feature that consists of stress/accent, and intonation, contributing to the effectiveness of speech

Though there are many features to answer the question "what is in knowing a word?", pronunciation is one of the features associated with the spoken form, that is, the productive use of the language. Pronunciation influences language learning as Rodgers, Higa, Ellis and Beaton opine:

Pronounceability depends on the similarity between individual sounds and supra-segmentals like stress and tone in the first language and second language, the ways in which these sounds combined with each other (called phonotactic grammaticality). (Nation. I.S.P, 2000)

Pronounceability is the core feature of the spoken form of the language. It is learnt initially before the mastery of the other aspects of language are enabled. In fact, pronunciation reflects the intelligibility of speech and denotes the language competence; the ability to use the right word along with right pronunciation at the right time and in the right place makes one an effective speaker. However, in the ESL contexts, the target language is under the effect of Mother Tongue Interference (MTI) where the learners apply the same rules of the mother tongue to the target language, both with both individual sounds and the stress and intonation. For example, an individual who is not aware of the sound /3/- *pleasure*, or the diphthong /eI/ - *play*, cannot perceive the distinction.

General vocabulary learning is also influenced by phonological awareness. Goldstein (1983) directs at the imperative need of lower-level SLL dependency on phonological cues as they lack native-like understanding of semantic and syntactic restrictions in word prediction and decoding.

Feigenbaum identifies that the 44 sounds of English give rise to 251 orthographic forms, increasing the pronunciation challenge to the ESL learners. The cluster /ch/ can be pronounced either as in church (/tʃ/), chemistry (/k/), machine (ʃ). This feature, known as the aphonetic one, shows that sound and symbol do not correspond in English language. Besides this feature, pronunciation difficulties arise due to non-existing sounds in mother tongue – both vowels and consonants, Silent letters, Double consonants, Stress, Assimilation, Elision, Intonation and other oral discoursal aspects, discussed below (with reference to Indian speakers, and specific reference to Telugu speakers).

i. Vowel Sounds: Pronunciation difficulties are experienced with certain vowel sounds. These include both Monophthongs and Diphthongs, listed below:

/ æ, ʌ, eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, əʊ, aʊ, ɪə, eə, ʌ:, ɔ:, ʊə, ɜ:, ə /

For instance, in the word ‘cake’ (/keɪk/), the diphthong /eɪ/ is uttered as a single sound. Similarly, the word ‘go’ has the diphthong /əʊ/, however, it is uttered as a single sound, and as a long ‘o.’ The diphthong /aɪ/ which is glide towards the front, is pronounced as single front vowel. In the utterance of the central vowels - / ʌ, ɜ:, ə /, there is no distinction perceived, by the ESL speakers, as a result, words with such sounds are mispronounced.

ii. Consonantal Sounds: Following are some of the challenges with reference to the pronunciation of consonants.

a. Aspiration: Words beginning with /p,t,k/ are aspirated when they occur in the accented initial syllable. Ex: [p^h æ t]. This feature is not distinct in the spoken form of the ESL learners. In some cases, the aspiration of [P^h] is mispronounced as /f /, corresponding to the Telugu sound “ఫ్.”

b. The sounds /dʒ/ and /z/ are interchanged where the MTI can be perceived, as in the case of /zu:/ pronounced as “జు” / dʒu:/.

c. The sound /v /- a labio-dental fricative and /w/- a bilabial semivowel, are articulated without any distinction in pronunciation as in water, went, van, vase, etc.

d. Pronunciation of /θ, ð/ - the dental fricatives are pronounced in unison with the Telugu pronunciation- త, డ, and the feature of aspiration is attributed in certain cases with ‘థ’, pronounced as ‘డ.’

e. The difference between mute & unmute /h/ is an ignored feature observed often by the second language learners. Silent /h/ in the words ‘hour’ and ‘honest’ is often pronounced. Along with this, The use of indefinite/definite article is a common error that creeps in the speech, as an associated feature of the wrong pronunciation.

f. Pronunciation of both /ʃ/ - pressure, /ʒ/ - measure is also a difficult aspect, both the sounds are palato-alveolar fricatives, one is a voiceless, while the other is a voiced sound. These sounds do not exist in Telugu and primarily uses sounds like "zh- జ " as in "measure."

g. Pronunciation of /ŋ/ - **ing** (ng): This is a velar nasal voiced sound, which is mispronounced as prominent ‘ng’ as in /sɪŋg/, whereas it should be uttered as /sɪŋ/.

h. The "dark L [ɫ]" is a variation of the /l/ sound in English. It is a velarized sound produced by raising the back of the tongue towards the soft palate while the tip of the tongue pointed at the alveolar ridge (behind the top teeth), as in *light*, *elongate* and *release*.

It contrasts with the “clear/light L (/l)”, that is produced with the tip of the tongue touching the alveolar ridge, as in "leaf," "like.”

i. The post-alveolar sound /r/, is mispronounced as Telugu ‘ra (ఠ)’ sound. As a result, it leads to mispronouncing of the words, without emphasis, as in the case of ‘rose, red, rubber.’

j. Pronunciation of /j/ to the non-native speakers might be a challenge, owing to the articulation. /j/ is a palato-alveolar semi-vowel, which is not a similar/known feature in the Telugu language. Consequently, the sound is dropped at the beginning of words, often resulting in the wrong sound as in **-eng**, instead of **young**.

iii. Syllabic Consonants: Every word is constituted by a syllable as its integral division, and a vowel forms the nucleus of the syllable. The word ‘air’ has only a diphthong /eə/, with final unreleased /r/. However, in the absence of vowel, consonants such as /m,n,l/ also known as “Syllabic Consonants” function as the nucleus of the syllable.

The pronunciation feature of the word gains importance as in the following cases:

a. Those which lose the vowel sound: button, mutton, dozen, caution, tension, certain, written, spoken, couple, double, camel, oral, kitchen, mention, nation etc.

b. Those which gain the vowel sound: prism, rhythm etc.

iv. Consonant clusters: A sequence of two or more consonants occurring at the beginning (cream) or end of a word (texts), as a single syllable form the consonant clusters. These clusters occur in permissible patterns denoting the phonotactic feature, occurring either initially or finally (/pl-, pr-, bj-, tr-, tw-, dr-, kw-, gr-, fl-, spl-, str-, spr-, stj-, skr-, skw-, hj-, mj-, nj-, -lp-, -pt-, -kt-, -tct-, -ft-, -dst-, -kst-, -lst).

This feature does not exist in some Indian languages, consequently, the speakers introduce a vowel sound /ɪ/, or /e/ in words beginning with the initial consonant cluster /s/, resulting in the mispronunciation of the word. Ex: School is uttered as either /ɪsku:l/ or /səku:l/.

v. Silent Letters: This is a peculiar feature of English where some phonemes in specific contexts remain silent, that is, the sound is not uttered, or not considered. If this is not brought to the notice of the ESL learners, their pronunciation gets totally distorted, as in the following cases:

1. final **e** - (table, alone, drive);
2. initial **g** and **k** (before a nasal) – (gnat, gnome, knee, know);
3. **h** mute – (hour, honest);
4. initial **p** before **n** and **s**- (pneumonia, psychology);
5. initial **w** before **r** – (write, wrong);
6. **b** before **t** – (debt, doubt, subtle);
7. **c** in 'indict' and **d** in Wednesday;
8. silent **gh** in the middle and final position- (thought, daughter, sigh, weigh) and pronounced as **f** in the final position - (tough, cough, rough);
9. silent **l** before **k** and **m** – (talk, walk, calm, palm);
10. silent **r** in the middle and final positions- (water, chatter, fork, hard, park);
11. silent **t** after **s** - (listen glisten);
12. silent **b** after **m** – (climb, comb, dumb);
13. silent **d** before **g** – (dodge, judge, hedge);
14. silent **n** after **m** – (hymn, column, autumn).

*The exceptions with some cases need to be emphasized through proper pronunciation of the words, wherever applicable.

vi. Gemination

The feature of Gemination refers to the doubling of a consonantal sound which is pronounced with emphasis, giving the effect of repetition. This is a notable feature both in individual words and in connected speech, prefixed words, and compound words.

- Word boundaries: In English, words with double consonants within the word are always pronounced as single consonantal sound. 'Black coffee', the sound /k/ is uttered for some duration.
- Within the word: The sound /m/ in the word "swimming" is not emphasized or stressed, but pronounced as a single sound (/swɪmɪŋ/).
- Affixation: Words like "immovable, unnecessary" have two distinct /n/ sounds.
- Compounding: Words like "bedding, bookkeeper, midday" exhibit a longer sound of the double consonant.

As most of the Indian languages, particularly Telugu, indicate the stress or emphasis in orthography (visual symbol), the visual impact of double consonants makes them phonologically emphatic. This leads to the mispronunciation of the words.

Yet another important aspect of vocabulary with reference to pronunciation is the morphophonemic feature that results in the following changes as Elision, Assimilation, Strong and weak forms, and Stress.

vii. Apocope refers to the feature where a phoneme in a word loses its existence and gets elided. This feature known as "Elision" refers to the loss of final sound, and is a permanent feature in colloquial speech.

1. In Words - facts /faks/, today /tedɪ/, collect, connect, correct, reflects etc.
2. In Phrases - text book /teksbuk/, next day /neksdeɪ/, west side /wessaɪd/ etc.
3. Contracted forms: it's, I'm, you're, I've, I'd, I'll etc.

viii. Syncope is the feature of a word losing its medial vowels or consonants.

Ex: perhaps [pə'hæps], halfpenny [ha:fpɛnɪ]

ix. Assimilation: This feature makes one phoneme gain the nature of a succeeding or preceding phoneme. It becomes voiced or unvoiced, as the case may be.

1. Progressive Assimilation shoes – shoez, trends -- trend z, seasons
2. Regressive Assimilation bank -- /ŋ/; monkey - /ŋ/; month - /ŋ/; tenth- /ŋ/
3. Assimilated in expressions such as pick **n** move, salt **n** pepper etc
don't be silly - **dombe** silly; won't you - /wəʊn tʃu:/, as you - **az** you
4. A voiced consonant becomes voiceless when preceded by a voiceless consonant. good taste - /gutteɪst/ dead time /dettam/
A voiceless consonant becomes voiced when succeeded by a voiced consonant.
foot ball - /fudbɔ:l/ base ball - /beɪzbɔ:l/

x. Strong and Weak Forms: Words in English fall into two categories: Function or Structure or Grammatical words, and Content or Message words. The function words belong to a closed group and are weak in utterance. The division of words in a sentence into these two types – Content or Message words and Structural or Function words – gives a clue to the users of English to utter them properly in Oral communication.

Content or Message words have their own meaning and are strong in utterance. Among the Parts of English Speech, nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs and exclamations or interjections are Content words and are stressed in speech.

Pronouns, articles, helping verbs, prepositions and conjunctions are used as Structural or Grammatical words. According to the context and the intention of the speaker, these words may or may not be stressed, resulting in the strong and weak forms respectively. For instance, 'and' in its strong form is pronounced as /ænd/, while in its weak form can be uttered as /ənd/, /ən/, or /n/.

So, the ESL learners should be made aware of this specific feature of English for the right pronunciation.

xi. Stress and Pronunciation: In an English utterance, the word stress depends on whether it is a Content or Function word. All the content words – Nouns, Adjectives, Verbs, Adverbs, and Interjections are stresses, indicating the function of the word. Further, stress in rapid /connected speech denotes the attitudinal function.

Ex: `Photograph, Pho`tography, Photo`graphic, photo`graphical, photo`graphically

In the above example, a shift in the stress can be noticed with words that are derived by means of affixation. This in turn contributes to the initiation of the pitch on the right syllable of the word at the sentence level determining the intention of the speaker.

The sentence “Rahul is leaving to Delhi tomorrow” can have atleast 4 different meanings, by emphasizing different words each time. Similarly, a statement may be used as question by raising the tone on the exact syllable of the word.

The rules governing the stress patterns, the functions of the tone, tonic syllable, should be implicitly drawn to the attention of ESL learners, enabling them to use the words, and sentences appropriately.

5.0 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications of the Study

The main objective of English Language Teaching – ELT -- in India is to enable the learners use communication skills to succeed in their academics and occupational domains. Though researchers opine that enhanced repertoire always contributes to the level of confidence of the learners, in the globalized context of English use, pronunciation too has its great impact on the individual's performance.

Being a conscious process in a formal setting, language learning, particularly a second/foreign language, provides insights into the rules, but may not always impart fluency in conversations automatically. The pedagogy should consider inculcating the right pronunciation and intelligibility in communication by focusing on the rules pertaining to individual sounds, clusters, silent letters at the primary level of education. After a certain level of proficiency is attained, by middle school level, their attention should be drawn to the features of word stress, implicitly. In the digitalized era, availability of various platforms / resources, and software programmes in the form of audio-visual aids facilitate such implicit instruction.

Moving further, at high school level, the ESL learners should be provided with information about the Parts of Speech at the lexical level, with reference to content and function words to be effective in communication. As the ESL learners progress further in academics, this knowledge will benefit them to perceive the distinction between the shades of meaning when the same words are used for different purposes, as in the case of Homonyms (object, produce, conduct, etc.). Furthermore, such kind of exposure to the target language facilitates the ESL learners to observe the finer nuances in connected speech, thus, enabling them to use the target language with appropriate intonation, denoting the attitudinal function of stress, functional at the sentence level.

In the learners' long academic pursuit, vocabulary imparted with a focus on pronunciation also helps them to get familiarized with the spelling system, resulting in a holistic development of language.

The pedagogical implications and suggestions on teaching the phonological aspects of words as identified by the researchers include:

- Improved word acquisition can be seen when vocabulary is taught with International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), stress and syllables
- Internalizing the phonological form correctly is aided by repetitive audio input
- Real-time feed back on learners' pronunciation can enhance learning through various Apps like ELSA Speak, Forvo, and Google Dictionary
- Storing and retrieving accurate vocabulary can be attained by focusing on minimal Pairs, stress patterns, and intonation

Thus, Pronunciation, one of the aspects of vocabulary forms the base for proper communication, and hence, significance should be given to the aspects of vocabulary in the pedagogy to enhance the use of target language effectively by the SLL, for intelligible communication. Adapting the best available resources according to the level of learners from the lower level of education shall benefit the SLL, and will nurture learner autonomy, facilitating vocabulary development on a continuum.

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