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Difficulties of Albanian speakers in pronouncing particular English speech sounds

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language has always been a very complex learning and teaching activity. Pronunciation of particular English sounds has been an abstruse problem and difficulty to which teachers and students put a lots of efforts aiming to establish a basics interactive learning routine, upon which will be constructed, efficient learning strategy of ELT acquisition with Albanian students at the SUT. There is a very specific sound category, which on the level of syllables and words, in many ways provokes pronunciation difficulties which make native Albanian learners encounter a range of pronunciation difficulties, in the assimilation of these particular sounds.

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1. Main study objectives and the main particularities of the speech apparatus in production of English sound variations

The main study objectives of this paper are as follows:

- To identify the main difficulties which cause problems in learning and assimilation the English sounds;
- To describe the most particular causes, and their severity in terms of learning and assimilation of these sounds,
- To assess the degree of learning difficulties with the university students target group as a representative sample;
- To develop new approaches and models leading towards a better learning of pronunciation of the English sounds.

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The main particularities of the speech apparatus in production of English sound variations are:

- the part of the tongue used in their formation,
- the height of the tongue,
- the position of the lips and the inherent length.

Main particularities of the speech apparatus in production of Albanian variations:

- the part of the tongue, raised and labial participation,
- labial participation characterized as weaker and with a lower overall inherent length, the position of the lips, slightly relaxed.

2. Documented student difficulties in pronouncing vowels

The fact that in English are 20 vowels, is enough to prove that the major part of the students, do have difficulties in assimilation these sounds. Seen from the prospective of the fact that all vowels are voiced and the fact that in English they appear in different pronunciation, as well as having in mind the influence of the L1, the target students through their answers provided in the questionnaires, have resulted in a bunch of variation pronunciation of these sounds. To illustrate this, I'll give a table of the most frequent English vowels' pronunciation and the difficulties that the tested students have undergone during the process of their assimilation. The table below shows the use of the general accent as an example, while pronouncing difficult and easy vowels, excluding diphthongs:

[ɑ]	the A	in <i>father</i>
[æ]	the A	in <i>cat</i>
[ə]	the A	in <i>about</i>
[ɛ]	the E	in <i>bet</i>
[e]	the A	in <i>pay</i>
[i]	the I	in <i>machine</i>
[ɪ]	the I	in <i>big</i>
[o]	the O	- in <i>toe</i>
[ɔ]	the O	- in <i>cost</i>
[u]	the OO	- in <i>cool</i>
[ʊ]	the OO	- in <i>good</i>
[ʌ]	the U	in <i>bug</i>

According to all four groups of students' performance, the case of /ɪ/, like in *bet*, *set*, and the vowel [ʊ] in the words like: *lower high*, *back*, as a back rounded vowel, appeared to have a problematic pronunciation particularly with the first two groups of students, i.e. the students belonging to the lower language abilities and communication skills. The other two groups especially the group, consisting of students with high communication skills, this vowel has been pronounced in a correct way, by pronouncing it exactly as a *back rounded vowel*. In terms of percentage, the overall student performance shows that back vowels, appear to have been pronounced correctly with 35% of the overall number of the students, while the rest which is 65% have produced an incorrect pronunciation which has slightly distorted like short [o] in the words like: *lot*, *plot*, etc.

The case of [æ], like in the words; *cat*, *fat*, *man*, *sad*, etc., has also appeared to be pronounced in different variations, all due to the L1. This sound has been mostly, pronounced like [e] in the words; *bet*, *pay*, *head*, *let* etc. Expressed in percentage, this sound has had a successful pronunciation of about 66% of the overall number of the tested students. The rest of the students, which is 34% of them have pronounced this sound in an incorrect way, which is due to the influence of the L1.

The case of /UR/ , the /IR/ pronounced like [ɜ]* - or, usually followed by an [ɪ] in the cases of *bird and purple*, appears to be of a very particular difficulties with students groups belonging to a lower language skills abilities. The sound / U / which should be pronounced as [ʌ], in the words *bug/dug/hug*, etc. there is a discrepancy concerning its pronunciation depending on the groups of the students who have been tested. If expressed in percentage, there comes out an accurate pronunciation of this sound of 65 % while the rest which is 35% of the tested students, have performed in a wrong way.

The sounds /OO/ [u] and /OO/ [ʊ] - in *cool-* in *good*, as a result of the way they are spelled, the tested students have had an impression that these sounds are pronounced like the Albanian /u/. In this regard, the tested students can't make the difference when the letters like the double <oo> in particular words like *floor*, and some other words alike, which are less frequent, are pronounced like the Albanian /o/. The case of: [A] in the words like; *father, cat, about, pay*, the E in the words like; *bet, get*, etc., the I in *machine, big*, and the /O/ in *toe, and cost*: has recognized a variety of pronunciations, which seen from the prospective of the mother tongue influence, proves a pretty high degree of the influence of the Albanian /A/E/I/O/.

3. Performance of the students in the pronunciation of the English diphthongs

Concerning the pronunciation of the English diphthongs, the research analysis regarding these sounds, has proven to come up with some results which are related primarily to the appropriate functioning of the speech system, which further on proceeds to the influence of the L1 i.e. the Albanian, particularly to sounds which belong to the same category as the English diphthongs, which exist in the local language variations. The table below shows words including diphthongs used in the research questionnaires, where L1 has a noticeable impact:

Diphthong	Example/word
æɪ	Main, brain, train etc.
aɪ	Bite,
əʊ	Low, blow etc.
ɔɪ	Toy, boy, troy etc.

The most important thing that one should know about diphthongs is that the first part of the sound is much longer and stronger, while the second part is shorter and weaker.[†] To illustrate this, the most appropriate sound of this category is the one found in the word eye, which sounds like [aɪ] composed of a vowel [a:] and another short vowel of a shorter duration and a weaker frequencies compared to the first one which is of a longer duration and a stronger density, which is [ɪ]. The last part of this diphthong is almost unnoticeable, because of the very fact that the student pronunciation primarily focuses in the first one. This way or technique of the English diphthongs' pronunciation represents an overall rule to all other diphthongs being characterized by the feature of their last part being pronounced weaker.[‡] Recalling the fact that the overall number of the English diphthongs in total eight, the student performance regarding the correct pronunciation of this sound category, is more or less alike with some light exceptions of difficulties in pronunciation like in the case of the diphthongs such as; /aɪ/ , in the words *sky, buy, cry, tie*, etc., the diphthong /ɔɪ/ in the words *bier, pier, hear*, etc., /eə/ , in the words of foreign origin primarily coming from French such as; *ampere, ampère, billionaire, Blair, blare, br'er*, etc., and /uə/ in the words such as; *allure, amateur, amour, aperture, armature, assure*,

[†] Roach P. English Phonetics and Phonology, University of Reading, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 21

[‡] Ibid

Aznavour, of French origin, but not in cases of the words such as; manure, mature, moor, Moore, etc. of English origin. Further on, difficulties in pronunciation of the problematic diphthongs have appeared with the performances of the diphthong such as; /əʊ/ in the words such as; *oh, no, so or phone*, and in some words of foreign origin as well as typical ones such as; *aglow, ago*, further on the words like; *aero, aggro aikido, airflow, air show, Alfa Romeo, alfresco, allegro, also, alter, ego*, etc. In the pronunciation of these words, the final part of the diphthong has been weaker or almost nonexistent, while the front part of the diphthong has not been very strongly pronounced. This way of pronunciation has been persisting in the so called ‘difficult diphthongs’ of English, which as such has been triggered as a result of the influence of the L1. This phenomenon has been also affected by the insufficient students’ exposure to the Medias, to the music as well as to the so called *passive exposure to English*.

4. The overall research focuses in pronouncing English consonants

Approximately, 30 consonants sounds composing the Albanian sound system, is a fact which shows that Albanian students do have difficulties in pronouncing these sounds, but far less than some other students from other ethnical background. Seen from this prospective, the following features have been closely watched: voicing, aspiration, mouth position, specific sounds.

The study carried out in this problematic with the native Albanian students pronouncing English consonants, revealed the following overall characteristics:

- Tendency to produce an overall soft variation of the *plosive consonants*, such as /p/,/t/,/d/,/g/ etc. replacing them with soft sounds which are unlike English ones. There is a tendency of them to occur as homophones. This is the case of the words like: /t/ and /d/ are typically pronounced as dental stops as in the words like *tide, time, dare, don't, develop etc.*
- Tendency to pronounce /p/,/ t/,/ k/ as un aspirated stops.
- Tendency to replace [ŋ] with [ŋŋ] ("*singer*" rhymes with "*finger*") or as /n/ (combined with the above tendency makes the words "*king*" and "*keen*" homophones).
- Tendency to replace word-initial /sm/ with [zm], e.g. *small* [zməl]. This voicing also applies to /sl/ and /sn/.
- Tendency to pronounce the final /g/ as a strong [g] which is against the English pronunciation rules;
- The tendency of pronunciation of /g/ in thing like /k/ in *think*, etc.
- Tendency to add /h/ to some vowel-initial words.
- Albanian language does have the dental fricatives, which is not the case with 10 Native non Albanian students, who according to the gathered pronunciation data of these sounds, have performed the voiceless [θ] has been replaced with a dental [t̪] or with [f] while the voiced [ð] has become a dental [d̪].

The case of affricates (plosives and fricatives)

- They are characterized by the same place of articulation:
- Produced examples are the following: [tʃ] and /dʒ/ sounds at the beginning and end of the words ‘*church*’ [tʃ__tʃ], ‘*judge*’ [dʒ__dʒ]
- It is usual to regard tʃ, dʒ as affricate phonemes in English (usually symbolized by the Albanian [ç] by [ts], [dz],[tr], [dr], etc.
- The phrases ‘*why choose*’ wai [tʃu_z] & ‘*white shoes*’ wait [ʃu_z], are said to show the difference between these affricates.

5. The most appropriate techniques for the elimination of pronunciation problems of EFL learners

Concerning the difficulties in pronouncing the problematic sounds, the following techniques need to be taken into consideration:

- Word - association drill in learning pronunciation;
- The substitution drill in learning the English sounds with the tested students;
- The activity of tongue twisting in learning English sounds.

6. Overall suggestions pronunciation improvement

As a result of this research, language teachers must be aware of these techniques or methods and should apply any of them while teaching pronunciation. It must be borne in mind that teachers are the models for their learners, so first of all they should have good pronunciation; otherwise, they can harm their students. Learning English takes years of study. Correcting pronunciation is a *one-time-only* task. The learner needs to be able to hear the correct sounds. Then he/she needs to make easily work the use the muscles of the mouth, the tongue and jaw, all in order to make possible easily to produce the problematic sounds, imitating the native speaker and the teacher. As with exercise, repetition then helps establish the improvements and integrate them into their natural speech. On the other hand, to contribute better to the assimilation of the English sounds, the learning tools such as audio-tapes, recorders and IT or as we call them computer learning, can be helpful in pronunciation correction. However, according to the ELT methodologists, in this regard, it's more effective to arrange organized attendance of courses of English out of the school as well as make students be more in touch with the so called passive exposure to English in TV, listening to songs, watching movies as well as learning from internet portals dealing with English sound pronunciation. Of course, the most efficient method remains working with a trained professional as well as long term journeys in English speaking countries.

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