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Teaching English pronunciation to a Russian speaker (a single-case analysis)

Обучение русскоязычного студента произношению на английском языке (отдельное целевое исследование)

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of a Russian-speaking student's speech sample compared to British normative pronunciation. A number of inconsistencies with the "generally accepted pronunciation" of vowels and consonants, as well as the rhythm of speech, were identified in the speaker's pronunciation. The article discusses the most common mistakes in the student's speech and offers phonetic exercises to improve articulation.

Keywords: teaching English pronunciation, common pronunciation in English, British normative pronunciation, phonetic exercises for a Russian-speaking student.

Аннотация

В данной статье предоставлен анализ образца речи русскоговорящего ученика сопоставленного с Британским нормативным произношением. В произношении говорящего был выявлен ряд несоответствий с «общепринятым произношением» гласных и согласных звуков, а также ритма речи. В работе рассматриваются наиболее часто встречающиеся ошибки в речи учащегося и предлагаются фонетические упражнения для улучшения артикуляции.

Ключевые слова: обучение английскому произношению, общепринятое произношение на английском языке, Британское нормативное произношение, фонетические упражнения для русскоговорящего студента.

Introduction

Pronunciation is kind of a "calling card" of a speaker that unconsciously draws the attention of an interlocutor. Natural sounding speech has proven to help avoid misunderstanding, and it leaves a more positive impression on a listener. Such benefits are especially important during employment interviews, business negotiations, and other spheres of life.

Teaching English pronunciation to Russian speakers might be challenging due to significant differences between phonological systems. The absence of equivalent sounds, and the presence of articulatory differences in consonants and vowels, creates difficulties in pronouncing English correctly. Furthermore, rhythm and stress patterns of English are particularly demanding for Russian speakers (Swan & Smith, 2001).

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This article presents an analysis of a reading sample given by a Russian speaker; and it reveals five problematic-pronunciation features distinct from standard British-English pronunciation. Based on these troublesome areas, an individual lesson plan was outlined for improving the speakers' pronunciation.

Literature review

Several studies have examined differences between English and Russian phonology, and their implications for teaching English phonology to Russian speakers (Larionova, 2011; Smith, 2005). While most were based on comparing the phonological systems, there is not much research conducted on a speech analysis of a non-native speaker. Even less literature considers the variety of English pronunciation regarded as suitable for language teaching.

Although there is no unanimously adopted "standard pronunciation," most accept Received Pronunciation (RP) to be "correct," in that it doesn't show any local differences that might be regarded by some to be wrong or non-standard (Trim, 1961).

Presumably, RP is most widely used in the academic world. According to Palmer (as cited in Close, 1971), this variety of "standard pronunciation," is especially suitable for teaching English. There are a number of reasons for that:

- Firstly, it has been adopted by a majority for whom English is a native language, and even for whom it is a foreign language.
- Secondly, for over 50 years, RP has been presented in significant reference books, textbooks, and other materials, for the teaching of EFL and ESL. It has been a standard in English teaching materials not only in Britain but in many other countries as well.
- Thirdly, RP has been most clearly, entirely, and consistently described, compared to other varieties. This may be a reason for employing and presenting it in textbooks and dictionaries, as a standard. As Daniel Jones states (as cited in Trim, 1961): "I do not regard R.P. as intrinsically 'better,' or more 'beautiful,' than any other form of pronunciation. I have recorded it because it happens to be the only type of English pronunciation about which I am in a position to obtain full and accurate information".

There has been much debate over whether "teaching English pronunciation according to standard rules," seems to be more justified in spite of all advantages of "English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)."⁵ The strongest reason for standard rules is the absence of a standardized ELF. To have a kind of pronunciation so that learners can be mutually understood wherever and with whomever they communicate is essential.

Overall, a non-native speaker will learn English pronunciation efficiently, if a single and clear model is given from the outset. This clear model is RP, which is able to "facilitate ready communication between equals in a shrinking world" (Trim, 1961).

Methodology

Since the research does not lend itself to statistical significance, a qualitative research methodology was considered to be more appropriate for speech sample analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This method allowed for purposively selecting a target speaker with a pre-intermediate level of English, the level which is particularly dealt with in secondary schools. The speaker is a 14 year-old Russian student studying in a secondary school in Kazakhstan. She was given a short paragraph in English and asked to read it out loud. Her speech was recorded and examined for phonology.

Results

A detailed analysis of the tape recording has revealed several pronunciation features which were distinct from RP. I will focus on five mistakes in pronunciation which are often repeated in the speech and are the most common trouble areas for Russian speakers. To make the information more accessible, the results will be presented in a table.

⁵ English used as Lingua Franca can be characterized by features basically found in learner languages and by strategies to facilitate and simplify the target language.

I. Vowel /æ/.

Words in a text	Standard pronunciation	Non-native speaker pronunciation
<i>Land</i> / lænd /, <i>happening</i> /'hæp (ə) nɪŋ /, <i>and</i> / ænd /, <i>had</i> / hæd /, <i>that</i> / ðæt /, <i>than</i> / ðæn /.	In order to pronounce /æ/ one needs to raise the front of the tongue, near open the mouth and spread the lips (Roach, 2000).	The speaker often replaced the phoneme by a more close sound similar to /e/. Thus, following words are pronounced: <i>Happening</i> /'hepenɪŋ/, <i>had</i> /hed/, <i>that</i> /zet/, <i>than</i> /zen/, <i>land</i> /lend/, and /end/.

II. Vowels /u/ and /u:/.

Words in a text	Standard pronunciation	Non-native speaker pronunciation
<i>Could</i> /kud /, <i>over</i> /'əʊvə /, <i>grown-ups</i> /'grəʊnʌps /, <i>to</i> / tu /	In producing /u/, the back of the tongue is raised considerably high, the lips are rounded without protrusion (Roach, 2000).	In spite of the longitude of the vowels, words in the first and the second rows were articulated similarly.
<i>Too</i> / tu: /, <i>into</i> /'ɪntu: / <i>who</i> / hu: /, <i>do</i> / du: /, and <i>CO2</i> / si: əu tu: /.	In articulating /u:/, the back of the tongue is raised higher and the muscles of the articulating organs are tenser than for /u/. The lips are also rounded without prominence. Phoneme /u:/ is always longer than /u/ (Roach, 2000).	The sound pronounced by the speaker is close to the sound /u/ however it is a bit longer (but not longer than /u:/). It is produced with more elongated and rounded lips. The back of the tongue is closer to the soft palate and jaw is opened further than in the sounds /u/ and /u:/

III. Consonants /θ /- / ð /.

Words in a text	Standard pronunciation	Non-native speaker pronunciation
The consonant /θ/: <i>thought</i> /θɔ:t/, <i>something</i> /'sʌmθɪŋ/, <i>things</i> /θɪŋz/.	In producing phoneme /θ/, lips are spread, the tip of the tongue and the upper teeth form a narrow air channel; The air is lightly breathed out through the gap, and the acoustic effect is that of pure breath (Roach, 2000).	Throughout the text phoneme /θ/ is substituted with the Russian consonant which is very similar to English /s/: <i>thought</i> /sɔt/, <i>something</i> /'sʌmsɪŋ/, <i>things</i> /sɪŋz/.
The consonant /ð/: <i>There</i> /ðeə/, <i>the</i> /ði/, <i>weather</i> /'weðə/, <i>others</i> /'ʌðəz/, <i>than</i> /ðæn/, <i>with</i> /wɪð/, <i>that</i> /ðæt/.	In the utterance of sound / ð/ speech organs occupy the same position as in phoneme /θ/, however it is voiced, while /θ/ is breathed (Roach, 2000).	While, phoneme / ð/ was replaced by a sound similar to the English /z/: <i>There</i> /zeia/, <i>the</i> /ze/, <i>weather</i> /'veza/, <i>others</i> /'azes/, <i>than</i> /zan/, <i>with</i> /vɪz/, <i>that</i> /zat/.

Words in a text	Standard pronunciation	Non-native speaker pronunciation
<i>Where</i> /wɛə/, <i>weather</i> /'weðə/, <i>was</i> /wɔz/, <i>heatwaves</i> /'hi:t, weɪvz/, <i>were</i> /wə:/, <i>which</i> /wɪtʃ/ <i>went</i> /went/, <i>when</i> /wen/, <i>with</i> /wɪð/.	Sound /w/ is a voiced consonant. In articulating it, lips are pushed forward as to say /u/ however tongue and lower lip drop shortly. The muscular tension is concentrated on the lips, which makes /w/ a consonant, while the vowel /u/ has the muscular tension spread over all the speech organs (Roach, 2000).	The phoneme /w/ is pronounced as /v/ in the given words as following: <i>where</i> /veia/, <i>weather</i> /'veza/, <i>was</i> /vɔz/, <i>heatwaves</i> /'hitveɪvz/, <i>were</i> /və/, <i>which</i> /vɪtʃ/ <i>went</i> /vent/, <i>when</i> /ven/, <i>with</i> /vɪz/.

V. Rhythm

Regarding prosody of the speech sample, some features notably affect the degree to which the speaker sounds “natural.” The one I will attempt to analyse is “rhythm.”

In Standard English, speech rhythm is realized through placing stressed syllables at roughly regular intervals of time. The unaccented syllables are fitted into the available intervals between the stressed syllables. If there are a number of unstressed syllables in succession, they are pronounced quickly to fit into the available time (Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, 1974).

In Russian, unlike English, practically every word is pronounced with the same prominence, except prepositions which are attached to the content words (Dichushina & Abercrombie, 1965).

It can be noticed from the speech sample that the speaker occasionally stresses some function words which are not usually stressed in standard British English pronunciation. This might be the major reason for her failure to produce speech with regulated beats.

Individual lesson plan for improving the five pronunciation features of the speaker

Before proceeding to phonetic exercises the learner should understand how particular sounds are produced. For this reason, the student is asked to watch videos, about the sounds she needs to improve, on the BBC learning English site (Bellem, 2008). It is useful for the learner to listen and see how sounds are produced by a native speaker. There are side and front views of the presenter in the video recordings, so that a listener is able to see lips and tongue movements and can imitate easily.

Firstly, the presenter gives a brief description of a sound. Then, she pronounces a sound in isolated form and asks to try to pronounce it several times. She also provides articulatory instructions in a very simple and understandable way. Later on, she proposes some words which contain this phoneme and asks the listener to repeat them after her.

I. Vowel /æ/ vs. /e/

After /æ/ is established, it is necessary to teach the learner to distinguish this sound from /e/ which was the common mistake in her speech sample. For this, the following exercises can be offered.

- 1) **Minimal pairs distinction.** This exercise allows isolating and concentrating on the contrast sounds that prove most troublesome for the learner. It also gives the learner the possibility to differentiate phonemes as the same or different.

Procedure: The learner should listen and repeat the following words:



Brendan-Brandon

messed-massed

pest-passed

head-had

lead-lad

sender-sander

bettor-batter

ketch-catch

(Okonagan University, 2006)

- 2) **Test the teacher.** With the help of this exercise the learner will be able to check if she can distinguish /æ/ from /e/ in her pronunciation. It will also show the learner the importance of pronouncing these sounds correctly as they can change the meanings of the words.

Procedure: the learner should read the words aloud and the teacher should write down the word which was pronounced twice in the each line:

- 1) sat-set-set
- 2) men-man-man
- 3) pan-pen-pan
- 4) met-mat-mat
- 5) bet-bat-bet
- 6) back-beck-back
- 7) pet-Pat-Pat
- 8) bag-bag-beg

If the teacher writes down the correct word, the learner should proceed to the next line. If the teacher hesitates or writes down the wrong one, the learner should retry until the teacher is able to hear the repeated word.

- 3) **Tongue twisters.** The tongue twisters below were specifically selected for distinction of /æ/ and /e/ vowels. It might be useful to learn some of them by heart, as generally they assist in developing “phonemic awareness” and the skill to recognise and manipulate sounds in speech. Moreover, practicing them frequently develops better articulation.

Procedure: The learner should read following tongue twisters paying attention to the sounds being practiced. Teacher should listen to the speech and make necessary corrections. Then the student should try to read the sentences as quick as possible without making phonetic mistakes.

- 1) Lassie headed back to Peg and Allen for ten apples.
- 2) Ted tampered a tad in Brad's bread and jam.
- 3) Dan's den is a sad shed back of Beck's badly built bed and breakfast.
- 4) Hedley sadly said sending Sally a man was extra bad.
- 5) Stan stemmed his temper tantrum and lent Landry a bank cheque.

II. Vowel /u:/ vs. /u/

After the learner gets an idea of how these vowels are produced and what the difference is between the two, the following exercises can be completed to check understanding and to consolidate skills acquired while watching the video.

- 1) **Sort out the words.** This exercise will help the learner to recognise and differentiate between sound /u:/ and its short counterpart.

Unlike sounds /æ/ and /e/, it is more difficult to master /u:/ and /u/ as similar combinations of letters can represent both of the sounds. For example: **good**/gud/ and **food**/fu:d/. Therefore, the learner should learn such words by heart.

Procedure: The learner should listen and put the given words into the appropriate column. If a word has a long vowel the learner should place it in the left column; if short, in the right. After the words are arranged, the learner should listen to the words again and repeat after the recording.

Soup, rude, push, pull, bull, hoof, true, hood, root, soon.



/U: /	/U/

Correct answers: /u: /-soup, rude, fool, hoof, true, root, soon.

/u/-push, pull, bull, hood.

(Bellem, 2008)

- 2) **Find the odd word.** This task will help the learner to memorize the pronunciation of the words and recognise short and long vowel distinction.

Procedure: This exercise consists in reading the following lines of words and choosing the one which is pronounced differently. Afterwards, the learner should check her answers with an audio recording and correct mistakes if any. The audio recording can be played several times if any confusion arises.



1.	who	cool	fruit	push
2.	school	could	wood	hood
3.	should	good	mood	cook
4.	good	book	food	look

Correct answers: 1) push; 2) could; 3) mood; 4) food.

(Bellem, 2008)

- 3) **Minimal pair sentences. Dictation.** This exercise will help the learner to differentiate between the sounds /u/ from /u: / in larger language units. Correction lies in differentiating phonemes both in listening and writing.

Procedure: The teacher should read the following sentences to the learner, placing emphasis on short and long vowel distinction. The outcomes of the exercise will show whether the learner can distinguish the sounds by ear and write them down correctly. After the sentences are written down, it is useful for the learner to read them again.

The fool fell in the full pool.

Look! There is some soot on your suit.

Luke took a good look at this book.

Who'd seen a bull with a hood?

III. Consonants /θ/ and /ð/ vs. /z/ and /s/

- 1) This exercise is a variation on the use of minimal pairs which assists in “training the ear” of the student in differentiating the sounds.

Procedure: The teacher's task is to read one of the contrasting words aloud and the learner should decide which sound is pronounced every time and underline the appropriate word. Any items which cause problems should be repeated.

/θ/-/s/

sin-thin

seem -theme

tenth- tense

sick-thick
saw- thaw

/ð/-/z/
lathe- lays
lithe- lies
bathe -bays
tithe -ties
clothing- closing

2) Information Gap Exercise. This exercise practices both hearing and pronouncing of the consonants.

Procedure:

The teacher and the learner sit opposite each-other and take turns asking which words go into the empty boxes. First, the learner fills her empty boxes and then she reads her words to the teacher. The following questions can be used in this exercise:

“Can you tell me the word which is in the 4th (5th, 7th etc) box?”
“Could you repeat that please?”

Teacher`s table:

1) clothe	2)	3) thumb	4)
5) sank	6) thimble	7)	8) sink
9)	10)	11) bathe	12)

Student`s table:

1)	2) thick	3)	4) theme
5) then	6)	7) lithe	8)
9)	10) sin	11)	12) tense

3) This is another variant of using tongue twisters.

Procedure: In this task, the teacher reads the following tongue twisters and the learner chooses one of the italicized words. After the task is done, the learner should read the tongue twisters, pronouncing voiced and voiceless consonants.

/θ/
Nothing is *worth/worse* thousands of deaths.
It seems themes are *thought / sought* by thousands of mythical misses.
Mr. Smith's teeth are *thin/sin* and lethal.
/ð/
Bathing in the *bathe/bays* is soothing to those teething brothers.
Those of the southern and northern areas are still *writhing/rising* and seething.
Though dough is worthy, it is worthier with their father's *ties/tithe*.

IV. Consonant /w/ vs. /v/

After watching the video it is useful to do the following exercises for more practice:

1. Words with /v/ or /w/. This exercise will help the learner to practise her listening in differentiating sounds /v/ and /w/.

Procedure: The teacher should pronounce the words given below. The learner should listen to each word and circle /v/ if she hears /v/, circle /w/ if she hears /w/, or circle × if she hears neither.

Words: Vile, when, fest, water, rowing, very, mooing, wood.

1. v w ×	5. v w ×
2. v w ×	6. v w ×
3. v w ×	7. v w ×
4. v w ×	8. v w ×

- 2. Fill the missing word.** This exercise might be quite tricky as the learner should be very attentive in differentiating which of the sounds /w/ or /v/ were pronounced in the word as both of the variants will be suitable in the sentence. Thus, it might show the student the importance of differentiating /w/ and /v/ in words on hearing and while pronouncing.

Procedure: The student should listen to the tape recording and fill the gaps with missing words. The recording can be played twice if necessary. After the answers are checked the learner should read the sentences, paying attention to pronunciation of phonemes in the words.



1. My friends had a lot of _____ in their basement.
2. His poetry is becoming _____.
3. Her story was disturbed by a _____.
4. A _____ was used in the experiment.
5. The cows were _____ in the pasture.

Correct answers: vines; worse; wail; viper; mooing; (Okonagan University, 2006)

V. Rhythm.

1) “Introducing rhythm”

One of the effective ways to introduce clear rhythmic patterns to the learner is applying “non-sense” syllables along with tapping out rhythm, keeping the beats constant.

There are three sentences below, and each of them has a succession of nonsense syllables above. “*Tum*” is used for accented syllables and “*ti*” for unaccented ones.

Teacher should explain that in spite of the quantity of “*ti*’s” in succession, the learner should spend the same time between all “*tum*’s”. There are three “*tum*’s” in each example below, therefore the same time should be spent for each of the sentences. This means that the third example should be pronounced much quicker than the first and the second ones.

This exercise might give an idea of rhythm to the learner. It is necessary for the teacher to draw the learner’s attention to the fact that function words are not usually accented but that mainly content words’ syllables are emphasized. The learner should try to pronounce the phrases below taping on a desk or table at each accented syllable as she says it.

1. `Tum ti `tum ti ti `tum ti
`Raj ne`glected his `studies.
2. `Tum ti ti `tum ti ti `tum ti
`Raj has ne`glected his `studies.
3. `Tum ti ti ti `tum ti ti `tum ti
`Raj has been ne`glecting his `studies.

(Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, 1974)

2) “Ear training”.

This exercise is aimed to train the learner’s listening in perceiving rhythmic patterns. A teacher should read the following sentences twice with the correct accentuation. The learner should underline the accented syllables but not the whole words if they contain more than one syllable.

A show has been arranged.
He invited us to the party.
Everyone agreed.
He drank a glass of milk.
Don’t offend the judge.

3) “Production”.

In this exercise the learner should try to read the sentences given below with the correct accentual and rhythmic patterns. The teacher should check the learner’s reading and correct it if necessary. If the learner finds it difficult to pronounce the sentences in one smooth attempt, she might want to highlight accented syllables or write “non-sense” syllables above the phrases before reading them out loud. This will facilitate the pronunciation.

- 1) We think he is right.
- 2) I’m looking for stamps.
- 3) He injured his shoulder.
- 4) Turn off the light.
- 5) We couldn’t find the ball (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992).

These exercise might give the learner a better understanding into rhythmic patterns of English and relative importance of parts of the utterance. In order to automatize rhythm in speech, the learner should do a lot of reading, trying to speak out all the sentences with the correct accentuating. Listening to native speech and trying to imitate it is also desirable.

Conclusion

Pronunciation should be considered integral to English language teaching, for the reason that it is obviously one of the main things which affects communication. Absence of proper pronunciation can easily become the culprit of misunderstanding or offence among people.

To reiterate, pronunciation has been defined as the way a word is pronounced with reference to a recognized standard. Although there is no consensus in adoption of standard pronunciation, Received Pronunciation (RP) is considered to be the most neutral and “correct,” and it is the most clearly described, and fully developed. This variety of pronunciation has been regarded as particularly suitable for language teaching given its adoption for standard use in many English teaching books worldwide.

The single case analysis has been conducted proceeding from the standard British English pronunciation or RP. A reading sample of a Russian speaker has been analysed where five pronunciation features are found to be distinct from RP. These mistakes were revealed in pronouncing the sounds /æ/, /u/, /u:/, /θ /, / ð /, /w/ and the rhythm of the speech sample.

Due to the significant difference in phonological systems of the two languages, Russian speakers find it considerably difficult to master English pronunciation. The absence of equivalent sounds makes Russian learners to substitute them with the ones existing in Russian. This often leads to confusion among some words as it was seen from the analysis.

In order to improve the five pronunciation features, a variety of exercises have been proposed to the non-native speaker. Though a communicative approach to pronunciation is said to be effective by some, for this speaker, it would be a waste of time integrating pronunciation exercises with communicative activities, since pronunciation is

the only aspect she doesn't command. Therefore the exercises were chosen from the most common ones focusing on the area of pronunciation problematic for the speaker.

The proposed phonetic exercises are aimed to help the learner to articulate the sounds correctly and differentiate them from the mistaken sounds. The exercises for rhythm are organized such that the learner can get familiarized with the rhythm and the way it is produced, and then she can practise it in listening and production.

Overall, mastering pronunciation is one of the most difficult aspects in language learning, therefore, it should be introduced at the beginning level and practiced continuously.

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