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Academic Word List Pronunciation of the First Year English Education Students

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Keywords: academic word list, English education student, pronunciation

1. Introduction

In mastering a language, such as English, learners need to deal with four basic skills, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In speaking, pronunciation plays a pivotal role in delivering the message from the speaker to the interlocutor. Unclear pronunciation may lead to misunderstanding or thwart the communication between both sides (Connor, 1980; see also Kreidler, 2004; Mulatsih, 2018; & Wulandari, 2019). Considering the importance of pronunciation to its English education students, the English Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University decided to categorize pronunciation as a compulsory course for the students to take and pass.

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by Bram Barli

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1. Introduction

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To figure out the correct or acceptable English pronunciation, Burleigh and Skandera (2005) suggest that students look up to the dictionary or the standard pronunciation which is regarded as the Received Pronunciation. One of the reliable references to figure out the pronunciation is the Oxford dictionary (Burleigh & Skandera, 2005; see also Bansal & Harrison, 2009; Derwing, Diepenbroek & Foote, 2012). Word spelling cannot give any clue on how a certain word is expected to be pronounced properly. O'Connor (1980) adds that "in ordinary English spelling, it is not easy to know what sounds the letter stands for". It means that in English spelling letters do not have exact sounds when they are forming a certain word. For example, the letter "o" in "women" is precisely pronounced differently to "women". In "woman", the letter "o" must be pronounced as [ʊ] whereas in "women", it must be pronounced as [ɪ]. In the dictionary, phonetic transcription of each word is provided. Furthermore, Burleigh and Skandera (2005) state that phonetic transcription is a certain method employed to write down the words said by the speaker accurately. In other words, it transfers the data from sounds to the written one as letters or symbols. As a result, by looking up the phonetic transcription, English learners are able to orally produce the similar and the proper sounds.

In this study, two questions were formulated as follows. First, do the first year English Education students of Sanata Dharma University pronounce the selected academic words listed in the Academic Word List correctly? Second, what is the percentage of the correct pronunciations of the students in pronouncing the selected academic words?

In the following literature review, the theory of pronunciation, the theory of phonetics and the Academic Word List (AWL) are presented. Nunan (2003) says that sounds made by people when they are speaking are considered as pronunciation. In people's communication, either socially or educationally, pronunciation plays an important role. Kenworthy (1997) states that if the pronunciation is unclear, ambiguity and misunderstanding between the speakers and receivers might be happening (see also O'Connor, 1980; Piske, MacKay & Flege, 2001; & Pitt, 2009). Pronunciation is inevitably one of the language aspects that must be mastered by English education students. In other words, if students of English education cannot orally produce such proper pronunciation, they will be more prone to have problems in speaking or communicating with others using English. Nunan (2003) concludes that the sounds produced by people are used as a tool to communicate with others.

Due to importance of pronunciation in English speaking, the most certain proper pronunciation must be well figured out earlier. It means students must have known the English standardized pronunciation first before they practice pronouncing the words. Using native speakers as a role model can cause a difficulty for students to copy the pronunciation. One of the factors is the English accent. Native speakers who have thick and cannot be softened English accent will give a real difficulty for learners to understand. It can lead learners to misunderstand the delivered words. English students will find difficulty in learning pronunciation because they are confused with the English accent (Kenworthy, 1997; see also Kreidler, 2004; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Field, 2005).

Theoretically, since there are two main standard accents in English, namely American and British, students and teachers or lecturers should take one path to follow on consistently (cf Andang, & Bram, 2018). Connor (1980) suggests that English learners take one of standardized English models in which they hear most. In accordance with Connor's (1980) statement, it means that if students deal with American English more often, it is better for them to use American English as their English model, especially in pronunciation. On the contrary, if the students engage more in British English, it will be better for them to use British English as their model, especially in pronunciation.

In this paper, the researchers used the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries online to determine whether or not a pronunciation is correct for two reasons. Firstly, the Oxford Dictionaries online provide the two varieties of major English accents (American and British English) for each word. Secondly, Burleigh and Skandera (2005) say "standard British English popularly refers to King's English, Queen's English, BBC, and Oxford Dictionaries".

Next, the theory of phonetics is presented in the following. In order to write down the sound of the pronunciation into the written form, a certain technique has to be applied. According to Burleigh and Skandera (2005), phonetic transcription is one of the accurate ways to apply. Phonetic transcription does not deal with the spelling. Connor (1980) claims that word spelling cannot be used to determine how the letters or words are pronounced consistently. As discussed earlier, the example is the different sound of the letter 'o' in the word *woman* and *women*. In *woman*, the letter 'o' must be pronounced as [ʊ] whereas in *women*, it must be pronounced as [ɪ]. Since phonetic transcription is able to transfer the sounds into written form more accurately than spelling, there is no doubt to employ it in this study. For more information about phonetic transcription, Burleigh and Skandera (2005) state that it is the way or process of writing down the sounds. To be able to write down the sounds accurately, we use phonetic alphabet symbols. Below are International Phonetic Association symbols (2007), dividing into three sound categories, namely vowel, diphthong and consonant sounds.

Vowel sounds

"/ɪ/ pin, English, business
/e/ bed, head, bury, exit
/æ/ cat, bag, apple, black
/ə/ the, a, woman, banana
/ʊ/ look, put, could, cushion
/ɒ/ clock, what, because
/ʌ/ cut, come, mother
/ɜ : / girl, burn, word, heard
/ɑ : / car, art, heart, half
/ɔ : / or, board, door, small
/ɪ : / sea, bee, people, receive
/u : / too, blue, fruit, fool"

Diphthong sounds

“/eɪ/ take, pay, wait, ballet
/aɪ/ five, sigh, height, buy
/ɔɪ/ noise, boy, lawyer
/əʊ/ no, road, sew, broken
/aʊ/ round, renowned, doubt
/ɪə/ here, deer, dear, fierce
/eə/ care, air, mayor, prayer
/ʊə/ poor, insure, tour, moor”

Consonant sounds

“/p/ play, stop, speak, power
/b/ bad, baby, big, object
/t/ ten, later, little, pot
/d/ day, advice, bed
/k/ character, quick, taxi
/g/ got, exam, ignore, finger
/f/ food, laugh, telephone
/v/ vain, over, Stephen
/θ/ thin, earth, method, both
/ð/ they, father, breathe, with
/s/ small, since, scene, psalm
/z/ zoo, goes, xenophobe
/ʃ/ shell, nation, machine
/ʒ/ genre, measure, vision
/h/ hot, hair, whole, whose
/m/ moon, lamp, lamb
/n/ can, snow, pneumonia
/ŋ/ string, singer, tongue
/tʃ/ chair, match, future
/dʒ/ just, general, age, soldier
/l/ look, small, bottle, isle
/r/ real, train, wrong, write
/j/ yes, Europe, university
/w/ window, twin, quick, why”

Finally, the Academic Word List contains a list of words which will likely be used by students studying at university in an English-speaking country and was developed by Coxhead (1998) (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/about/academic>). Zwier (2009) points out

that academic vocabulary is group of words that are mostly used in terms of education, but it is rarely used outside that field. Thus, it can be concluded that an academic word list is closely related to the educational field. It means that English Education students are going to deal with this group of words more often. It can be used properly by them in terms of communicating with others using English. The researchers employed the academic word list of Oxford Learners Dictionaries. There are over 200 academic words on the list; nevertheless, the academic words used in this study were 10 words. The selected academic words were as follows: 1. analyze, 2. analysis, 3. assume, 4. assumption, 5. consist, 6. context, 7. define, 8. definition, 9. methodology, and 10. procedure.

2. Method

The researchers employed quantitative research to conduct this study, applying a one-shot design. Mackey and Gass (2005) point out that one shot designs belong to quantitative research designs. The researchers chose the one-shot design as the method because it did need to deal with any pretest or posttest. Mackey and Gass (2005) explain that a one shot design classifies learners' knowledge at one particular time. In this study, researchers classified learners' pronunciation of the academic word list, without giving any treatment beforehand. This was in line with Mackey and Gass' (2005) proposal that there was only one treatment in gathering data and one measurement afterwards in a one-shot design.

The researchers employed the theory of phonetic matching to determine the answer to the research question, whether or not English Education learners of Sanata Dharma University were capable of pronouncing the provided academic word list correctly. The research utilized that method because according to Wugshile and Leubnitz (2001), "phonetic matching is used to evaluate the similarity of pronunciation of pairs of strings, independent of characters used in their spellings".

The instrument of this research was the audio recorder of learners' pronunciation. The audio recordings were transcribed using phonetic transcription and then analyzed. This research used random sampling in selecting first year students. There were 10 first year students who were randomly selected. Each of the selected students was asked to pronounce 10 academic words provided. Thus, in total, there existed 100 learners' phonetic transcriptions to analyze.

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3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis, the researchers present and discuss the results in the following. Before discussing the performance of the students, the correct pronunciation of each word selected is shown as follows.

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. analyse | /ˈænəlaɪz/ |
| 2. analysis | /əˈnæləsis/ |
| 3. assume | /əˈsj:um/ |

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 4. assumption | /ə'sʌmpʃn/ |
| 5. consist | /kən'sɪst/ |
| 6. context | /'kɒntekst/ |
| 7. define | /dɪ'faɪn/ |
| 8. definition | /,defɪ'nɪʃn/ |
| 9. methodology | /,meθə'dɒlədʒi/ |
| 10. procedure | /prə'si:dʒə/ |

The correct pronunciation of *analyse* in the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online is [ˈænəlaɪz]. Out of the 10 students selected, there were only three students who were capable of pronouncing this word correctly. The other students whose pronunciations were not regarded as correct failed to voice the ending sound of the word. The students more or less pronounce the word *analyse* as [ˈænələɪs].

The proper pronunciation of *analysis* in the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online is [əˈnæləsɪs]. Out of the 10 students selected, four students were capable of pronouncing this word correctly. The other two students whose pronunciations were incorrect failed to pronounce the vocal sound in the beginning of the word. Thus, they pronounced the word as [ænələsɪs]. Meanwhile, another four students could not perform the [ə]. These students pronounced the word as [əˈnælɪsɪs].

The proper pronunciation of *assume* found in the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online is [ə'sj:ʊm]. There were five students who were capable of performing the pronunciation perfectly. However, two students failed by voicing the sound [s]. As a result, they substituted that sound with [z]. Thus, the phonetic symbols of their pronunciations were [ə'zj:ʊm]. In addition, the other three failed students performed their pronunciation as [æ'sj:ʊm].

Based on the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online, the proper pronunciation of *assumption* is [ə'sʌmpʃn]. There were five students who successfully pronounced this word. Two students were regarded as failed after sounding the beginning sound differently. The first student produced the sound [e], while another student produced the sound [æ]. The other three students found it difficult producing the sound [ʌ]. The students pronounced it as [ə'sɒmpʃn].

The proper pronunciation of *consist* in the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online is [kən'sɪst]. There were only two students that were capable of pronouncing this word correctly. The main issue of this word pronunciation was the sound [t] in the very end of the word. Six students were unable to pronounce them correctly since they did not produce any [t] sound in the end of the word. The other two students tended to substitute the sound [ə] with [v]. In other words, they pronounced the word as [kən'sɪst].

The major issue found in this word is the sound [t] in the end of the word. Six students failed to produce the [t] sound in the end of the word. Furthermore, two students tended to substitute the sound [v] with [ə]. As a result, there were only two students who were capable of pronouncing the word properly.

The proper pronunciation of this word is [dɪ'faɪn]. Five students were successful in pronouncing this word. On the other hand, the other five students had problems with the first

syllable sound and the sound of [f]. Four students failed to produce the sound [dɪ] in the first syllable. They unintentionally substituted that sound with [də]. One student substituted the sound [f] with [v].

Surprisingly, there was only one student who unable to pronounce this word perfectly. Other students substituted the sound [f] with [v]. In other words, the students voiced the [f] too thick. It resulted in the phonetic transcription as [ˌdevɪˈnɪʃn].

There were six students who were capable of pronouncing this word correctly. The correct pronunciation of this word, based on the *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* online is [ˌmɛθəˈdɒlədʒi]. Three students failed to accomplish the mission because they pronounced the sound [dʒ] as [g]. Meanwhile the other student also failed because the sound [θ] was replaced with [ð].

For the word *procedure*, the researchers found only two students who were able to perfectly hit the target. Four students tended to substitute the sound [prə] in the first syllable with [prɒ]. Meanwhile, two students substituted and prolonged the sound [i] with [ɜ:]. Similarly, two students substituted the sound [dʒə] in the last syllable, with [dʒ ʊ].

In order to resolve the second research problem, the researchers provide a summary in Table 1 to show the results of students' pronunciation of each academic word selected from the Academic Word List.

Table 1. Percentage of correct pronunciation

Academic Word List	Correct Pronunciation	Percentage
analyse	3	30%
analysis	4	40%
assume	5	50%
assumption	5	50%
consist	2	20%
context	2	20%
define	5	50%
definition	1	10%
methodology	6	60%
procedure	2	20%
Total 35		

Since there were 10 words selected and 10 participants, 100 attempts of pronunciations, whether or not correct, were then audio recorded. The total number of correct pronunciations was 35. The researchers used the formula below to calculate the percentage.

$$\frac{\text{Total correct pronunciation}}{\text{Total pronunciation attempt}} \times 100\%$$

Thus, the formula results the following: $\frac{35}{100} \times 100\% = 35\%$. The calculation showed that only 35 per cent of the students who produced correct pronunciations in pronouncing the 10 selected academic words in the Academic Word List.

4. Conclusion

Based on the performance of the English education students in pronouncing the selected academic word list, it can be concluded most of them still encountered challenges in pronouncing the selected words correctly. The challenges covered primary and secondary stresses, voiced and voiceless sounds, vowel sounds and consonant sounds, to list some examples. With a total number of 35 correct pronunciations out of the 100, the percentage of correctness, which reached 35 per cent, was categorized as low. To improve their pronunciation, the students need to familiarize themselves more with the Academic Word List and continue practicing the words by themselves.

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