

Fricatives and Affricates of English vocabulary: A Pedagogical Perspective for Assamese medium Learners of English

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Abstract:

Vocabulary, whether English or Assamese or of any other language plays a pivotal role to the language concerned. When we consider phonological aspect of vocabulary from the pedagogical perspective intended to basic level learners of English, it includes both the vowels (monophthong +diphthong) and consonantal phonemes. In the present paper we will restrict ourselves only to the problematic consonantal speech sounds (Fricatives and Affricates) of English vocabulary in the pedagogical perspective. We have come across that teaching and learning English and its vocabulary are unsatisfactory in Assamese medium schools especially in rural areas. The present work tries to make an attempt to study the problematic and difficult sounds of English vocabulary especially fricatives and affricates.

1. Introduction:

Fricatives and Affricates are the two classes of consonantal speech sounds that Assamese learners of English find most difficult to pronounce or pronounce wrongly. In the articulation of fricatives, the active and passive articulators form a stricture of close approximation and the air escapes through the narrow gap causing audible friction. On the other hand affricates are a combination of a plosive and a fricative. Unlike the complete closure of the vocal tract, there is a delayed release in the articulation of affricates.

The objective of this research is to ascertain the accurate pronunciation of these two classes of speech sounds of English vocabulary.

Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. David Wilkins (1972:111) summed up the importance of vocabulary for language learning: “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

It is noticed that most of the Assamese learners seem to have instrumental motivation for learning English. They learn English just for the sake of school requirement as English being a compulsory subject. In the indigenized varieties of English (IVEs) setting, “the reasons for studying English and the skills desired are overwhelmingly the ones normally labelled instrumental” (Shaw, 1981:121). Many a times, it is noticed that lack of motivation becomes one of the reasons that majority of the students fail the examination. Students find the English period quite uninteresting and difficult. The following are the reasons for choosing this topic to work on:

- (a) To explore the problematic English sounds that create problems in articulating and the way how the learners tend to use the nearest sounds from his/ her mother tongue.
- (b) To help the language teachers to realise the difficult sounds of English for learners and provide remedial measures accordingly.
- (c) To assess the pedagogical implications of problematic fricatives and affricates of English vocabulary for learners.

2. The Problematic Consonantal Phonemes:

Assamese learners of English find seven of the nine English fricatives and two affricates difficult to pronounce.

2.1. Fricatives: /f, v, θ, ð, z, ʃ, ʒ/ are non-existent in Assamese.

2.2. Affricates: /tʃ, dʒ/ are non-existent in Assamese.

3. Sound Change:

Fricatives and Affricates in English have shown sound changes. These seem to be replaced by some easy and near about sounds according to the law of least effort given by Ferdinand De Saussure (1966). The learners have problems in articulating seven fricatives and two affricates and they tend to replace these sounds as the following:

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|---------------|---------------------------------|
| a) /f/ → /ph/ | e.g. /fæn/ ‘fan’ → /phEn/ |
| b) /v/ → /bh/ | e.g. /væn/ ‘van’ → /bhEn/ |
| c) /θ/ → /th/ | e.g. /θæŋk/ ‘thank’ → /thEnk/ |
| d) /ð/ → /d/ | e.g. /ðen/ ‘then’ → /den/ |
| e) /z/ → /j/ | e.g. /zu:/ ‘zoo’ → /ju/ |
| f) /ʃ/ → /s/ | e.g. /ʃip/ ‘ship’ → /sip/ |
| g) /ʒ/ → /j/ | e.g. /vɪʒn/ ‘vision’ → /bhijOn/ |

- h) /tʃ/→/s/ e.g. /tʃeɪndʒ/ 'change' →/senj/
 i) /dʒ/→/j/ e.g. /dʒɔɪ/ 'joy' →/jɔɪ/

4. Roots and Causes of the phonological problems encountered by both Teachers and Students :

Teachers play a crucial role as far as second language teaching is concerned. He has to be cautious of his own shortcomings. His own faulty pronunciation may result a negative attitude in the mind of his/her students. Gatenby (1967: 213) is right when he says:

"If we can train the teacher, make him efficient, and give him confidence, he can himself remove or get rid of most of the other drawbacks."

The reasons why an English teacher of Assamese Medium School encounters problems while teaching correct English pronunciation are:

1. Teachers themselves have their own faulty pronunciation.
2. In-service training programme is not meant compulsory for teachers and conducted for longer duration. The notification regarding training of teachers normally does not reach the schools on time and most of the time the school authority is reluctant to release the teachers as because there are not enough number of the teachers to teach English to the concerned classes.
3. Teachers of English are not normally exposed to the phonetic features of the English language so as to teach their students correct pronunciation of English words. Most of them have a lack of comparative knowledge of English sounds and Assamese sounds, not being able to correct the spoken form of English words of their students.
4. Oral work is not encouraged and practised sufficiently by teachers.
5. Teachers are not specialised in English. Some of them are matriculate and surprisingly they are entitled to teach English without having their basic knowledge of English.

In order to have a clear picture of teaching- learning scenario of English in Assamese medium schools, what problems learners face are also the subjects of concern. He substitutes the unfamiliar and difficult sounds with some other speech sounds of Assamese. This pull of Assamese causes much unintelligibility. Such problems are to be handled by the teacher in the classroom. But the question arises in front of us as to what extent the teacher takes note of all these and makes necessary corrections. Learners do not get enough exposure to English; they face difficulties in articulating proper pronunciation, lack of perceiving correct spelling arising out of faulty pronunciation.

5. Suggestions and Recommendations:

Here an attempt is made to suggest the pedagogical issues in particular and academic principles in general which underline the teaching of phonology of English vocabulary items.

5.1. Academic factors:

1. In-service training programme should be made compulsory for teachers and it should be conducted for longer duration. The school authority should release the teachers.
2. Teachers should be exposed to the phonetic features of English so that they can teach their students correct pronunciation. They should have a comparative knowledge of English and Assamese sounds.
3. Efficient and knowledgeable teachers should be recruited to teach English. The selection should be impartial and fair.
4. Oral work should be encouraged and practised sufficiently.

5.2. Pedagogical Issues:

Before teaching pronunciation the teacher should highlight the new vocabulary while writing it on the blackboard. The teacher has to use the technique 'Mimicry-Memorization' through repetition drills to teach pronunciation. The teachers can use minimal pairs in order to teach two similar sounds that create problems. The teacher can make error-analysis and correction in different areas of pronunciation learning.

To teach the pronunciation of the problematic fricatives and affricates of English, the teacher has to follow:

- a) Say the sound in a word.
- b) Say the sound alone.
- c) Get the students to repeat it in chorus.
- d) Contrast it with other reinforced sounds.
- e) Get individual students to repeat the sounds in contrast in words.

The teacher puts up words on the blackboard that the learners have met during the week. The teacher pronounces them and the learners repeat after the teacher. Then the learners take turns pronouncing the words without the teacher's model and get feedback on their attempts. Regarding the articulation of English fricatives /f, v, θ, ð, ʃ, z, ʒ/ in the lexis, it should be taken care of as these fricatives do not have equivalent sounds in Assamese.

For /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, the teacher himself should be aware of articulating the correct pronunciation, as well as in the pronunciation of students.

- a) For the production of /f/ and /v/, the learners have to be told to keep his upper teeth very close to his lower lip instead of bringing the upper lip and lower lip into contact. The air in the vocal tract is to be allowed to flow continuously causing friction. They have to be guided + voice and - voice feature of the speech sounds.
- b) For the production of /θ/, the learners should be asked not to touch the teeth with his tongue but to keep it very close to it and subsequently allow the air to escape slowly and continuously.
- c) With regard to /ð/, the learners have to be taught to form a stricture of close approximation instead of making a stricture of complete closure. They have to be told of the basic difference between a fricative and a plosive. In order to articulate this sound without the tongue touching the teeth but bringing it very close to the teeth, sufficient practice has to be made by the learner. It has to be handled by the language teacher in the classroom.
- d) In order to articulate /ʃ/ the learners have to be asked to raise the blade of the tongue to touch the hard palate, keeping the tip of the tongue level with the teeth ridge and the lips getting slightly rounded.
- e) For the production of /z/, the learners have to be taught to lower the body of tongue and place the tip of the tongue very close to the alveolar ridge so that the air can escape continuously through the narrow gap instead of touching the hard palate with the blade of the tongue as in the production of /j/.
- f) The learners should be taught to pronounce /ʒ/ by raising the blade of the tongue and place it very close to the hard palate getting the lips slightly rounded.
- g) For the correct articulation of /tʃ/, the learners have to realise that /tʃ/ is a combination of /t/ and /ʃ/ and the manner of articulation makes it clear that there is a complete closure of the oral passage and then there is a delayed release or continued flow of air. The learners have to be taught to stop the air passage by firmly placing the blade of the tongue on the teeth ridge in /t/ position, build up air pressure between the palate and the tongue, and then release the pressure by quickly bringing the tongue to /ʃ/ position.
- h) The same remedial measure suggested for acquiring /tʃ/ has to be applied with regard to /dʒ/ and the teacher has to demonstrate the difference between a

voiced sound and its voiceless counterpart, and then ask the learner to acquire the voice by regular practice.

6. Conclusion:

So far we have looked at the difficulties of the Assamese learners of English and how the sound change takes place from fricatives extending to affricates. The replaced sounds are always plosives for fricatives /f, v, θ, ð/ unlike /z, ʃ, ʒ/ as fricatives /j, s, ʒ/ replace those sounds respectively by Assamese learners of English. Similarly affricates are replaced by fricatives. The learners are to be told of the basic difference between a fricative and a plosive and between an affricate and a plosive. It is good that the teacher should realise the fact that the law of least effort is one of the causes of sound change and accordingly he can make the language teaching process much easier.

References

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