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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify the difficult sounds and phonemes, the EFL Albanian students encounter during their language learning. By presenting the physiology of the sounds pronunciation and articulation, the Albanian students become aware of the non-compliant features for some problematic English sounds, which either differ in their articulation or do not exist at all in the sound system of their native language. Based on the long experience of English phonetics and Phonology teaching to EFL students at the Faculty of Education and Philology, we undertook this comparative study to describe the theoretical background of these sounds articulation in order to minimize students’ difficulties in learning pronunciation and to help them acquire good command of English language. Despite being a descriptive paper, we strongly believe that it will serve as a reference material not only for Albanian students, but also for teachers of EFL in other countries to build similar patterns of contrastive insight between English sounds and the respective native language of their students.

Keywords: sound articulation, teaching pronunciation, organs of speech, comparative study, phonological incompatibility.

1. Introduction

Teaching pronunciation is one of the most complicated, and at the same time a vital aspect of a foreign language acquisition. This seems to justify the reason why, due to the lack of attention in teaching pronunciation, it is called the “Cinderella” of language teaching”. (Thanasoulas, 2003)

Teachers feel comfortable when they teach their students how to read, write and listen properly. Actually, their target, teaching the above main skills, lacks pronunciation which, due to the often low level of emphasis placed on this very important skill, makes them limit themselves to just some insufficient advice and a mere explanation of the kind “It sounds like this…..”.

There is also another negative tendency to correct sound pronunciation. The judging attitude teachers have in matters of speech, deprives them of understanding the fact that if a student is to learn how to pronounce correctly segments or supra-segments, he or she should previously be provided with a correct model. If the patterned pronunciation is not clearly heard or received, so if there is no correct reception, the student tends to
convert it into the closest sound in his mother tongue. This constitutes a source of wrong “maternalized” pronunciations. (Dalton, 1997)

Nowadays teachers should focus on the fact that sounds and prosodic pronunciation play a crucial role in the process of communication, since they lay the bases of a successful communication. (Celce – Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 1996)

Actually, everyday communication may witness misunderstanding situations rising up from mispronunciation. As a result, there is inhibited comprehension by the speaker, or disorientation on the listener’s behalf.

In matters of terminology, it is to be accepted that, for a student, in our case an Albanian learner of EFL, the term “correctness”, is not the same with the norms of native English speakers or the rules stated by the Received Pronunciation. For the former it would imply “a commonly acceptable way of speaking a word”. (American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd, 1992) It implies that most Albanian learners of English as a foreign language tend to pronounce their utterances in English not to acquire a native like accent, but to be intelligible in their communication with other speakers of English (natives or not). They feel confident on the quality of their pronunciation of the English sounds, as long as this helps them communicate properly (even when the English sounds they articulate involve a lot of patterns, qualities and pronunciation features of the Albanian sound system).

Preliminary knowledge on some important elements of English phonetics and phonology would help Albanian teachers avoid most of the problems they might come across in their teaching pronunciation. This can be best provided by a comparative analysis of both languages phonology and examples of specific difficulties, Albanian students encounter in learning English pronunciation. Once recognizing the confusing issues, teachers can select useful information on how to make pronunciation classes effective and enjoyable at the same time. Though this study precisely deals with some difficulties the Albanian students encounter while learning English, we think that it could be widely implemented as a teaching model by teachers of English as a Foreign Language in different countries.

2. A comparative study of English and Albanian sounds

Teaching sound pronunciation in a foreign language involves some steps. According to Cecle-Murcia, the teacher should first identify the problematic sounds or wrong sound articulations. He/she should, afterwards, provide students with an assimilating and meaningful context of their usage and encourage practice by involving them in communication tasks. Thirdly, he/she should extend the range of practicing contexts for sounds that are not easily acquired by students. (Celce-Murcia, 1987)

This article aims at helping Albanian teachers overpass the first step that of finding the root of the articulation problem and then understand the range of differences that the sounds offer in both languages. Once having recognized these, they can easily provide suitable contexts of difficult articulations in both languages.

- Long vowels

Long English vowels [iː, aː, oː, uː], constitute an acquisition difficulty for Albanian students. Even though they are clearly identifiable in comparison with short vowels, due to their articulating peculiarities (when articulated on their own) their articulation in normal speech lacks obvious length. This is because the length of sounds in English language, including consonants, varies according to the context of occurrence (the
sounds following or preceding it), as well as the presence or absence of stress. (Roach 1983, 17)

If phonetic rules were stated as a whole, Albanian students learning EFL would lack the will, either to remember, or provide practical use of that theory. This is why, traditionally, teachers have either preferred to provide models of sounds by themselves and then ask students to repeat, or made facial diagrams, by drawing attention on peculiar positions of certain organs of speech involved in their pronunciation. An example of the first one would be providing distinguishing patterns of the kind:

to leave [li:v] versus to live [liv]

Substituting a long sound for a short one, or vice-versa, in the above examples would result in misunderstanding speech messages.

This peculiarity is encountered even in Albanian language. Albanian sounds as their English counterparts, can be short, middle or long, based on the muscle tension of the speech organs. However, these physiological factors do not constitute important features of the standard speech sounds. Except for some dialects, the length of Albanian vowels and consonants, has no functional value, therefore, it would not distinguish words as it does in English. (Memushaj, 2006)

Furthermore, the fact that English vowel length depends much on their position in a word, followed by voiced or voiceless consonants, or being final, (Fromkin, & Rodman, 1974) complicates the understanding of the sound articulation for an Albanian student. Since he/she is not used to, he/she does not recognize any difference in the length between the vowel sounds in the English words bet [bet] and bed [bed]. The vowel [e] in bed is longer than the one in bet. (Dobos, 2001, 47) If the following sound is voiced, the vowel that proceeds tends to be longer in English. In everyday speech, this peculiarity is not grasped due to the presence of the following consonant. This is why not only students, but even most teachers neglect the correct pronunciation.

- The vowel sound [æ]

The main difficulty with this sound is its being transcribed by a completely unknown symbol for the Albanian student. Therefore, while explaining the sound, the teacher should also make students understand its particular articulation. According to the position, the form and the section of the tongue taking part in its articulation, this sound is classified in English as a short, frontal and open vowel. (Roach, 1983, 15)

Such an explanation would not satisfy the need an Albanian student has to articulate it as it should. The teacher should demonstrate by making the student understand that the English [æ] is a weird combination of organs of speech involved in the articulation of two well-known sounds [a] and [e]. Actually, the lips are kept in the position of [a] and the back of the tongue in that of [e]. If shown the chart of English vowel classification, the students may understand why the vowel [æ] is between [a] and [e]. And if they are given a number of words in which it occurs, like man [mæn], lamb [læm], gas [gæz], chat [tʃæt], etc, they will remember that the sound never occupies a final position in English, which is not the case in the case of the Albanian ones.

- The vowel sound [ə] (schwa) ( “The New Collins Concise Dictionary of the English Language”)
The vowel sound [ə] is frequently used in English due to the reinforcing function it has. It accompanies weak or unstressed vowels. Phoneticians recognize it as a middle and central vowel due to the resting position organs of speech take in its articulation. (Roach, 1990, 64). It does not require much articulating energy.

The inconvenience an Albanian student faces with this sound is not the difficulty of pronunciation. Even though the phonetic symbol of the sound [ə] is a completely new one for native Albanians, the articulation of the sound is recognizable, due to resemblance it has with the sound [ɐ]. It is classified as a half-close, middle vowel, since the tongue slightly draws back in a central position, lowering its front, by occupying all of the space beyond the lower teeth. (Memushaj, 2009, 34) The main phoneme of this sound occurs in open stressed syllables, like vë [vë] - to place, zë [zë] - voice, etc.

The main problem consists in adding it to words which reflect difficult pronunciation due to consonant groups (not commonly encountered in Albanian). For example, the word little, which is normally pronounced [litl], is undoubtedly pronounced [litəl] by an Albanian student. He would not hesitate to do almost the same even in the following words: prism [prizəm], bottom [botəm], lesson [lesən] and cattle [kætəl].

- The Albanian sounds [c], [x]

There is no phonetic symbol for the letter “c” in English. However, there is one in Albanian. It is an alveolar fricative consonant, since the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge. The organs of speech get almost the same position as that of [t]. However, in the 2nd and 3rd step of the articulation, the tongue moves toward the position it takes in [s], but it is not a mechanical juxtaposition of [t] +[s]. (Memushaj, 2006, 18)

Since the sound group [ts] is not a very frequent one in English, the arguments of classifying it as a proper sound are not many. (Jones, 1939) Therefore, an Albanian student would not hesitate to read words like “pizza” [ˈpitsə]→[pica], “tsar” [tza:(r)]→[ca:ɾ], “tsunami” [tsuˈnaːmi]→[cunaːmi].

However, it is worth emphasizing the fact that, despite similarities, the English [ts] and the Albanian [c] do not possess the same phonetic qualities. Like English aspirated sounds [p, t, k], the Albanian [c] has a quality of breath in its articulation, as in “ngeci” [ˈnɡɛci], “i cili” [ˈci(li)] (that), etc.

The voiced consonant, respective to [c] in Albanian is [x], classified as a fricative one. It involves almost the same above-mentioned articulation, except for the fact that the consonants involved are [d] and [z].

- The sound [l]

The position of the tongue in the articulation of this sound is the same in both languages; the center of the tongue fully blocks the teeth ridge and the air escapes laterally on its sides. Phoneticians of both languages classify it as a liquid.

The reason it is recognized as a difficult sound for Albanian students of EFL, is that in English there are two variants of articulation, which are set by the context the sound occurs in. So [l] in “lea” [liː], is not the same with the one in “eel” [iː]; the former being a clear l and the later a dark l.

In the pronunciation of the Albanian consonant /l/, the tip of the tongue slightly touches the alveolar ridge. Their contact surface is relatively small. Like consonant /l/, /ll/ is pronounced with the tip of the tongue but it touches the upper teeth exactly in the area between the upper teeth and the alveolar ridge. Thus the intensity of /ll/ is perceived to
be stronger making it a “thick” sound while /l/ is known as “thin”. On the other hand, in the articulation of /ll/, it is the back part of the tongue which is mostly involved. It is pulled back and raised towards the hard palate creating so a valorized version of it. Thus, the sounds /l/ and /ll/ are different in their pronunciation, valorization and acoustically. (Memushaj, 2009, p. 118-119)

Most Albanian teachers either neglect the difference, or ignore the position of different parts of the tongue and hard palate involved in both variants. In the articulation of the clear l the given resonance is that of [i]. It never occurs in front of a consonant, or of a pause, but always in front of a vowel. While in the pronunciation of the dark l the tip of the tongue comes between the teeth and its back withdraws opposite the soft palate. The given resonance is that of [u]. (Jones, 1939, 162) So, both are allophones of the same phoneme [l] and even though most English native speakers might not know the theory of articulation, they would recognize something unnatural in the speech of a foreigner failing to follow the rule. (Roach, 1990, 47-48)

What Albanian teachers should try hard on is to convince their students that the dark l in English is not the same sound as the consonant [ll] (in its articulation the front of the tongue touches the teeth ridge) in Albanian, which is an easy substitute for the former. Avoiding the use of the clear l in front of vowels or [i], like in “leave” [li:v] or “left” [left], is a mistake as grave as substituting [l] for [ll] in the following Albanian words “plakë” [’plakë] (an old woman) and “pllakë” [’pllakë] (tile).

- The sound [r]

This sound presents articulation peculiarities that are worth being mentioned. Even though the organs of speech come close to each other, the passage created is not narrow enough so as to constitute a proper consonant. The tip of the tongue rises opposite the alveolar ridge without touching it. (Roach, 1990, 49)

It is this lack of contact which makes it different from the Albanian [r].

Further more, Albanian teachers of EFL should not forget that the roundness of the lips in the English [r] should not be exaggerated, otherwise it would produce a [w]. Substituting these two variants of [r] would give different phonetic connotations to speakers of both languages, resulting in a version sounding like Albanian or vice versa. Most Albanian students learning EFL may not remember the rule that the sound [r] is only articulated before vowels, like in “red” [red], arrive [a’raiv], hearing [’hiairin], but it is not pronounced after it or in a final position, like in car [ka:], even [’eva], here [hia], star [sta:], near [nia], roar [ro:]. (Roach, 1990, 50) They should be taught that neglecting this, would be like substituting the Albanian [r] with [rr], bringing into light unnatural speech. ([rr] is a liquid in Albanian. It is articulated with the tongue and lips in the same position with that of the sound [r], but it involves stronger friction and a closer rising of the back of the tongue opposite the soft palate.)

- The sound [t]

The articulation of this consonant does not constitute any hardship for students of both languages. If an Albanian student fails to recognize the difference between both variants in the same phonetic context, on words “time” [taim] and “tani” [tani] (now) said in succession, they can be taught that the Albanian [t] is less dental than the English one. The main inconvenience, however, seems to be the articulation of the London [t]. Being more rounded and needing exercising force, this sound carries similar qualities with the
Albanian [ç] = [t∫]. As such, it is conveniently replaced so as to make the speech more native (more English). Versions of [t∫u:] instead of [tu:] for the numeral “two”, are common among Albanian speakers of English in their first stages of study.

- The sound [w]

It is hard to explain to an Albanian student the formation and the phonetic function of this sound, since it is not a sound of the Albanian phonetic system. Saying that phonetically it is like a vowel, and phonologically it is like a consonant, would impede their understanding. Actually, they would hesitate to classify it as a consonant due to the vowel resonance of [u] it conveys. (The articulation of [w] involves the same parts of the tongue and hard palate involved in that [u], except that the lips are not rounded but half spread)

The acquisition would be easier if the teacher asks them to use the articles a/an or the[ðə]/[ði], in front of a noun whose initial letter is w. Normally they would say a woman due to the oral speech experience they might have had or heard so far.

- The sound [ŋ]

The sound [ŋ] is one of the three English nasal consonants [m/n/ŋ]. It is a problematic sound for Albanian people studying English as a foreign language, due to its phonetic qualities. It is not part of the Albanian sound system, but it can be acquired due to similarities with the sound group [ng], which is very frequent in the initial position of a considerable number of Albanian words like “ngarkoj” [ngarkoj](to load), ngre [ngre] (to raise). (It cannot occur initially in English) This sound group is considered to be a sum of [n] + [ŋ], but in everyday speech most speakers unconsciously pronounce it [ŋ].

In teaching phonology, however, it is not enough to say that it is a velar nasal consonant. Such phonological rules would require further explanation for the Albanian student, who would remain astonished in front of transcriptions of this kind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finger</td>
<td>[fiŋgə]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anger</td>
<td>[æŋgə]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>singer</td>
<td>[siŋə]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hanger</td>
<td>[hæŋgə]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Why is there a [g] sound introduced in the first but not in the second column?” The analogy would lead them into introducing one even in the second, [singə] and [hæŋgə], or into omitting [ŋ] altogether and substituting it with the Albanian [g]. The teacher’s task in here is to explain that the pronunciation of the words in these cases depends on a morphological analysis: sing + er and hang + er are composed of two morphemes, while the other words can not be further subdivided, finger and anger. Therefore, in a final position [ŋ] is never followed by [g], “sing” [sin], “bang” [bæŋ].

3. Conclusive thoughts

Phonological incompatibility, which is commonly accepted between languages, is of course a problem that hinders acquisition and somehow discourages students while learning a foreign language. Since pronunciation is not just an individual problem but it involves linguistic and social characteristics, the aim of this article was to reveal the main difficulties Albanian students would or can come across while learning EFL. Such knowledge would not only prevent learners from being confused (as the above mentioned sounds are commonly exchanged in the process of acquisition), but it may
also provide teachers with knowledge on how to make pronunciation an integrated part of their teaching process.

Phonemes are not acquired in a list. They would not be remembered for long, unless they were explained in a phonetic, linguistic and social context. The task of teachers is to unburden pronunciation from the imitating pattern of presenting a model and making students follow it. They have to make pronunciation an active element of EFL acquisition. By doing this they can not only help their students perform, but encourage them to avoid the influence of the mother tongue pronunciation.

This comparative study aims to perform the role of a connecting bridge between two different kinds of linguistic performances that both intend to be as natural as possible. Native speech, or at least Received Pronunciation, is the target of every one learning a foreign language. Failure to recognize mistakes does not help. On the contrary it deepens the gap of the above mentioned linguistic incompatibility, both teachers and students should be aware of. Knowledge in matters of phonological studies would help them not encounter speaking hardship that now can be overcome.

References


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