

FAMILIARITY OF WORDS IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE CORRECT PRONUNCIATION: HELPFUL OR NOT? ¹

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Abstract: Language is the major instrument of human beings to communicate with one another. This means that the primary role of a language is as an instrument in information exchange among people. Because language is primarily spoken, a speaker should pay attention to his or her pronunciation in order to avoid misunderstanding. When conducting a research on the problem of incorrect pronunciation of some specific English consonants in the Faculty of Letters Soegijapranata Catholic University Semarang, the researcher found a unique case in relation with the familiarity of the pronunciation among the respondents. In his research, the researcher used a pronunciation test consisting of words containing the problematic consonants and the respondents were some of the first year students of the Faculty of Letters Soegijapranata Catholic University. The words were taken from the most familiar English words to the less familiar English words to the respondents. The results are quite surprising because the familiar words are not always pronounced correctly and the less familiar words are not always pronounced incorrectly. What makes this case happen? What are the factors influencing the respondents' performance leading to correct or incorrect pronunciation in relation with their degree of

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familiarity to the words given? This article will discuss the problems and find out the factors influencing the respondents' pronunciation.

Key words: pronunciation, familiarity, correct, incorrect

INTRODUCTION

Since this article is dealing with pronunciation, we need to know first the definition of pronunciation. It is not so easy to define what pronunciation is in the formal term. However, Fraser et al. has made a sophisticated definition that "Pronunciation includes all those aspects of speech which make an easily intelligible flow of speech, including segmental articulation, rhythm, intonation and phrasing" (2001:6). Another simpler definition is presented by Yates, which is written as follows: "Pronunciation refers to the production of sounds that we use to make meaning" (2002:1). However, in this article, the definition of pronunciation is limited only to the way of producing speech sounds in a language by a speaker. Therefore, it can be redefined as the way of producing speech sounds in a language by a speaker, how these sounds are articulated in such a way so that they can be easily understood by the listener.

In this article, the researcher focuses only on consonants and does not touch upon vowels. Ladefoged (1975:6) states that consonants are speech sounds produced by the obstruction of airflow at some points in the organs of speech. Consonants are divided into voiced and voiceless ones according to their voicing aspects. According to Yule (1985:34), voiceless consonants are consonants produced when the air from the lungs passes freely without causing the vocal cords to vibrate because they are widely apart. Yule also makes a definition of voiced consonants. He said that voiced consonants are consonants produced when the air from the lungs passes causing the vocal cords to vibrate because they are drawn close together (1985:34). Then, according to their places of articulation, they are divided into nine types: bilabials, labiodentals, dentals, alveolars, retroflexed, palato-alveolars, palatals, velars, and glottals.

According to Ladefoged (1975:6), the meaning of places of articulation can be defined as the places or points where the obstructions of airflow from the lungs and vocal tract take place and the organs involved in the production of consonants. Finally, according to their manners of articulation, they are generally divided into five types: stops, fricatives, approximants, lateral, and affricate. Ladefoged (1975:8) has made a definition of manners



of articulation, which can be summarized as the nature and extent of the obstructions involved. Next, in relation with the word familiarity, we have to know how some English words or phrases become familiar to Indonesians.

First, most Indonesians begin to learn English in junior high schools where some others begin to learn in elementary schools, even a few of them receive English in kindergartens nowadays. When they learn English for the first time, they are introduced to some simple English basic words or phrases such as 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'yes', 'no', 'good morning', 'thank you', etc. These basic words or phrases are repeated many times until the students are able to memorize and use them. As a result, those words become familiar to them. Therefore, it does not make sense if there is someone saying that those basic words or phrases are not so familiar or asking how they can be considered very familiar words or phrases because they are always among the first words or phrases studied by the students when they were learning English for the first time.

Second, some English words are borrowed in the Indonesian vocabulary. Such words as 'universitas', 'kaset', 'komputer', 'telepon', 'zebra', and 'teknisi', which are from English words 'university', 'cassette', 'computer', 'telephone', 'zebra', and 'technician' are a few examples of the borrowed English words. When those words are used daily, they become familiar to Indonesians. The pronunciations of those words from both causes above of course also become familiar to Indonesians.

Finally, there are also some English words used by Indonesians for the reason of the "sophisticated self-image" in their social lives. For example, some people - mostly youngsters - prefer to use the word 'shopping' to the word 'belanja' because they want to be considered as "sophisticated" or well-educated people.

Those three facts are the general reasons of how some English words can be familiar to Indonesians. This familiarity can lead to two results: incorrect pronunciation and correct pronunciation of some specific English consonants. These problems will be discussed in the next sections in this article.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In his research, the researcher conducted a pronunciation test to the respondents. The test was compiled using some English words containing the problematic consonants. The words used were various in their degree of familiarity to the respondents; some are very familiar, some are quite familiar,

and some are less familiar. Only a few are new to them. However, not all words used and tested in the researcher's research for his thesis will be shown up in this article. Only some words considered appropriate to represent the problems of the degree of familiarity will be used. In general, there are four results of the research conducted by the researcher concerning the problem.

A. Familiarity Leads to Correct Pronunciation

It has to be understood first that not many familiar words are pronounced correctly when the researcher conducted his research. Even, the results were quite surprising because the lowest general error percentage made by the respondents is quite high (69.048%)⁴. It means that the respondents still made numerous errors when they were asked to do the test. Therefore, there are only two words from the study considered appropriate to represent the case of familiarity leading to correct pronunciation. The word is 'shop' /ʃɒp/ and 'zoo' /zu:./.

The majority of the respondents were able to produce the correct pronunciation of those two words. Only a few of them pronounced 'shop' as /sɒp/ and 'zoo' as /ju:./.

This percentage is taken from the results of the researcher's research in his thesis. It is possible that the familiarity of those words among Indonesians is the main cause why they are pronounced correctly. As written at the beginning, there are three general ways as to how some English words became familiar to Indonesians: introduced in educational institutions, borrowed in Indonesian vocabulary, and used for the reason of self-image. In relation with those two words, it seems that both of them were introduced to Indonesians when they learn English for the first time. The word 'shop' and 'zoo' can be considered as among the first words introduced to English learners. They are introduced to the learners not only in their meanings but also the correct pronunciation. In addition, the word 'shop' with its correct pronunciation is also widely used among Indonesians, especially the youngsters, because they consider that it is more prestigious to use the word 'shopping' than 'belanja' when they have conversations with their peers. Therefore, the majority of the respondents could produce the correct pronunciation of those words.

⁴ This percentage is taken from the result of the researcher's research in this thesis

From the above explanation, we can see that the familiarity of words with their correct pronunciation made the respondents able to produce correct pronunciation. This is quite normal because the more familiar something is to someone, the less chance for him or her to make mistakes. On the other hand, the less familiar a word is to someone, the more chance for him or her to make mistakes. This applies to the last case where the non-familiar words lead to incorrect pronunciation that will be discussed later.

B. Familiarity Leads to Incorrect Pronunciation

On the other hand, familiarity of words does not always lead people to correct pronunciation. The examples are the words 'she' /ʃi:/, 'three' /θri:/, 'prize' /praɪz/, 'university' /ju:nɪ'vɜ:səti/, and 'the' /ðə/ or /ði/. Most of the respondents pronounced 'she' as /si:/, 'three' as /tri:/, 'prize' as /praɪs/, 'university' as /u:nɪ'fɜ:səti/, and they tend to pronounce 'the' as /də/ or /di/.

For the word 'university', as mentioned before in the introduction, it had been borrowed to Indonesian vocabulary and its form became 'universitas'. Indonesians pronounced 'universitas' as /u:nɪ'fɜrsitas/ not /ju:nɪ'fɜ:sitas/. That is why the initial consonant /j/ is not pronounced. How could this happen? It is possible that most of the respondents were familiar enough with those words but they were not familiar with their correct pronunciation. In addition, according to the finding in the research conducted by the researcher, Indonesians tend to replace English sound system with Indonesian sound system considered appropriate if they cannot find the exact sound. This statement is also strengthened by the statement from Poedjosoedarmo. He said:

Phonemes, such as, /θ/, /ʃ/, /z/, /f/, /v/, and /x/ do not exist in the original Indonesian language system. They exist now because they are borrowed from English and other languages - such as, Arabic and Dutch - to enrich the Indonesian language system (Poedjosoedarmo, 2002:15).

In addition, Indonesians also seem to accept /f/ more easily than /v/ although /f/ does not exist in the original Indonesian language system. It seems that most Indonesians tend to pronounce the voiceless consonants for both voiceless and voiced consonants if there are voiceless and voiced consonants having the same places and manners of articulation. Moreover, most of the respondents replaced /ʃ/ with /s/, /θ/ with /t/, /z/ with /s/, /ð/ with /d/, and /v/ with /f/ because the replacement phonemes are more familiar to

them since those phonemes, except /f/, are among the original Indonesian sound system.

As a result, most of them made errors when pronouncing those consonants although they had already been familiar with the words used in the test.

From the above explanation, we can see that the case of incorrect pronunciation of the familiar words happens when the respondents are familiar with the words but they are not familiar with their correct pronunciation. The factors leading to incorrect pronunciation in this case generally can be described in three points. Firstly, it is possibly caused by the differences between English and Indonesian sound systems. Some English phonemes, as Poedjosoedarmo explained, cannot be found in the original Indonesian sound system. Later, when Indonesian absorbed influences from other languages including English, those phonemes were introduced and adopted. On the other hand, there are some original Indonesian phonemes having the same voicing aspects or places or manners of articulation as the introduced phonemes, e.g. /s/ and /ʃ/ have the same voicing aspect (voiceless) and manners of articulation (fricatives) but different places of articulation, /s/ is an alveolar while /ʃ/ is a palato-alveolar. Because the Indonesian phonemes have the 'almost the same' sound as the introduced ones, most Indonesians tend to replace the introduced phonemes with those Indonesian phonemes with the consideration that those Indonesian phonemes are 'appropriate' enough to use when they speak Indonesian. However, when they speak English, they tend to stick to the Indonesian phonemes, which later lead them to incorrect pronunciation.

Secondly, it is also possible that the incorrect pronunciation was caused by the teachers when the students received their first English lessons. Because correct pronunciation was basically never taught in English classes and most teacher maybe focused only on basic skills, there is a big chance to make incorrect pronunciation. It is getting worse if the teacher did not master the material well. When the students received the lessons, they probably would think that whatever they received is correct. As a result, they made incorrect pronunciation without realizing it. Finally, the respondents probably stuck to the Standard Indonesian pronunciations⁵ when they read the English

5 Standard Indonesian pronunciation is a standard pronunciation of Indonesian which makes us unable to recognize the origin of the speaker using that pronunciation because it has been accepted and used widely (Wibisono, 2003:8).

words, which had been borrowed by Indonesian. Because they were more familiar with the Indonesian words, they tended to pronounce the English words in the same ways as the Standard Indonesian pronunciation. The result is that, the incorrect English pronunciation is almost inevitable.

Standard Indonesian pronunciation is a standard pronunciation of Indonesian which makes us enable to recognize the origin of the speaker using that pronunciation because it has been accepted and used widely (Wibisono, 2003:8).

C. Non-Familiar Words Pronounced Correctly

To be honest, it was quite interesting to find out that the respondents were able to pronounce non-familiar words correctly. Normally, most people tend to make mistake when they are introduced to something new, in this case words. However, it seems that human nature plays an important role; the nature to be more careful when faced to something new. The example is when the respondents were asked to pronounce the word 'shack' /ʃæk/. To the respondents, the word 'shack' was quite new. They became more careful, not to make mistake in pronouncing the word. As a result, some of them were able to pronounce 'shack' correctly.

D. Non-Familiar Words Pronounced Incorrectly

It is normal if people make mistake when they are faced to something new. This case also happened when the respondents were asked to read some words, such as, 'breathe' /bri:ð/, 'sheath' /ʃi:θ/, and 'zeal' /zi:l/, which were not familiar or new to them. It is possible that they had tried to find out the correct pronunciation and had tried to produce the correct pronunciation. However, because those words were not familiar or even new to them, most of them failed to do it correctly. As a result, most of them produced incorrect pronunciation of those words. How about the correct respondents? Maybe they were very careful when faced to those words and became more aware not to make incorrect pronunciation.

CONCLUSION

After reading the research results above, we; can conclude that the degree of familiarity can play an important role in the correctness of pronunciation. The familiarity of words will lead to correct pronunciation if the speakers are also familiar with their correct pronunciation. On the other

hand, the familiarity of words will lead to incorrect pronunciation if the speakers are not familiar with their correct pronunciation.

For the case of non-familiar words, there are two possibilities apply to this. If the speakers are aware and careful enough to the non-familiar words, the chance to make incorrect pronunciation is lessen. On the other hand, if they are not aware and careful enough, the chance to make incorrect pronunciation is greater. From the explanation, we can say that the familiarity of words is helpful in producing correct pronunciation if it is accompanied with their correct pronunciation and it will make better results if accompanied with awareness.

Finally, it is important to be familiar with English words when we use English to communicate, especially in spoken English. However it is more important to be familiar with their correct pronunciation because by doing this, we can avoid misunderstanding among speakers of English. Although some mispronunciation does not seem too serious in leading to misunderstanding, such as the replacement of /θ/ with /d/ in the word 'the', other cases of mispronunciation cause more serious problems. For example, if we pronounce the word 'three' as 'tree', the listener will think that we talk about a plant instead of a number. This is how familiarity of correct pronunciation helps us pronounce words correctly.

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