



RESEARCH ARTICLE



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PRONUNCIATION TEACHING AND LEARNING AMONG INDIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: THE CASE OF LABIOVELAR APPROXIMANTS /w/

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ABSTRACT



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This study explores the pronunciation patterns among Indian learners of English in the Malaysian context. Its primary objectives are twofold. First, it aims to examine the extent to which the learners substitute labiovelar approximants /w/ with voiced labiodental fricatives /v/, which is a common feature among Indian speakers of English. Second, it investigates the degree to which drilling can improve the learners' pronunciation of English. Data were obtained using a mixed-methods approach, i.e., questionnaires and interviews. Forty-two Indian students from Universiti Kuala Lumpur were recruited as participants for questionnaires while five of them were selected for interviews. The findings show that the students were aware of the distinction between /w/ and /v/, i.e., they usually replaced /w/ with /v/ in English words. The students also agreed that pronouncing /w/ in English was problematic for them. With regard to drilling, it was found that the learners had some exposure to this teaching technique in their classrooms. Drilling, however, only slightly helped them improve their English pronunciation. The study highlights the importance of searching for more effective ways in the pronunciation teaching and learning of English and calls for further experimental research in this rarely investigated field.

Keywords: *Pronunciation Teaching and Learning, Indian Learners of English, Indian English, Drilling, English Language Teaching.*



INTRODUCTION

English is regarded as a global language, and this implies that there is a need for people to understand each other's Englishes since there are many varieties of English such as Malaysian English, Singaporean English, and Indian English (see, e.g., Hamzah, Ahmad, & Yusuf, 2017; Rajadurai, 2006). The differences of these new Englishes are most apparent in the area of phonology, which maintains distinctive features in many sub-varieties of English (e.g., Gilakjani, 2011; Hamzah & El-Weshahi, 2018).

In Malaysia, English is considered as a second language. The majority of Malaysians have different first languages (L1) which might become a barrier in pronouncing certain sounds in English such as /r/, /l/, /w/, /v/, /θ/, and /ð/ (Hamzah, Norain, & Abdullah, 2015). According to Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), learners' difficulties in producing certain sounds in the target language are often viewed as pronunciation errors that arise due to phonological transfer from their L1. Sailaja (2011) asserts that Indian speakers of English use dentals and retroflexes for interdental and alveolars, and /v/ for /w/. Many researchers (e.g., Naser & Hamzah, 2018; Yang, Cook, & Sheng, 2017) have shown the evidence of phonological transfer. The pronunciation errors made by English language learners from different backgrounds are always claimed to be systematic (Ghulamullah & Hamzah, 2017; Kalaldehy, 2016).

Indian English (henceforth, IE) is a variety of English used by most Indians across the globe. In the Malaysian context, Indian speakers of English usually replace the /w/ sound, which is not available in the consonant inventory of their native language, with the /v/ sound (Hamzah & Asokan, 2016; Maskara, 2013). This linguistic phenomenon is seen as the styles that L2 learners of English demonstrate in their pronunciation to suit the different contexts or environments (Wiltshire & Harnsberger, 2006). The current study focuses on the IE as spoken in Malaysia. More specifically, it aims to investigate the speech pattern among Malaysian Indian learners of English with a focus on the initial /w/ sound versus the /v/ sound. It has been generally known that IE speakers may potentially pronounce the words "wet"

as "vet", "wine" as "vine", causing miscommunication since the pronunciation of these words are almost similar (Sailaja, 2009).

In this study, we would like to find out why the Malaysian Indian speakers replace the initial /w/ sound with the /v/ sound. Besides, we aim to explore the speakers' perception on drilling to improve pronunciation. The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. Why do Malaysian Indian speakers replace the initial /w/ sound with the /v/ sound?
2. What do Malaysian Indian speakers think of drilling in improving their English pronunciation?

The findings will provide additional information on the existing knowledge concerning the difference in the L2 phonology among English language learners, and also add some knowledge to the phonology of IE as spoken in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pronunciation is an area of language learning that deals with sentimental and social skills, rather than physical factors (Kelly, 2000). When it comes to English pronunciation, non-native speakers may favour their own accented English intonation that leads to a variety of English (Hamzah & Bawodood, 2019; Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011). Indian speakers of English may also prefer to use the type of English that is closer to their mother tongue. As stated by Wiltshire and Harnsberger (2006), IE is an English variety spoken by millions of people across the world, including the Indians in Malaysia.

There are some unique features in the spoken aspect of IE as compared to that of British English, especially when it comes to the sounds of /v/ and /w/. There is only one sound of /v/ or /w/ in Tamil, which is **வ** (Maskara, 2013). There is also no difference in pronouncing "water" /wɑ:tə/ and "voter" /vɑ:tə/ in Hindi as it sounds **वॉटर** (Phull & Kumar, 2016). Also, many Indian speakers of English do not differentiate between the sounds /v/ and /w/ since there is no equivalent consonant in Tamil (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016). In addition, as stated by



Ramsaran (2015), IE has numerous differences as compared to British English; one of them is /v/ which is realised as frictionless /v/ and weak /w/. The /v/ and /w/ sounds are particularly challenging among IE speakers since a labiodental sound is quite difficult to pronounce (Sailaja, 2009).

Pronunciation is considered as one of the most difficult skills in English language learning (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Hamzah, 2014; Hassan, 2014). Many learners of English encounter difficulties with English pronunciation even after an extended period of learning. One of the effective ways to teach pronunciation is the use of drilling. Drilling is believed to be one of the teaching techniques that can help learners improve their ability in English pronunciation. This technique may help learners to practise their muscle memory as well as the movement of their tongue and jaw (Sa'diah, Apriliaswati, & Novita, 2015). In this way, learners are taught to imitate the model of the language by doing exactly as what a teacher is pronouncing.

A proper drilling has been considered as a required teaching skill that helps learners remember and develop pronunciation abilities (Cervantes, 2008). Also, it allows learners to feel comfortable and confident since everyone is doing the same thing, which is repeating after the model. Riswanto and Haryanto (2012) stated that a drilling technique is beneficial in teaching pronunciation since it may lead to accurate pronunciation. Besides, oral drills may also promote communicative ability and competitive learning when a teacher conducts a class in competitive ways (Egwoogu, 2012). Kristiyana (2011), for example, examined the relationship between drilling practice and learners' pronunciation. The results show that there is a significant effect of using minimal pair drilling on learners' pronunciation. Similar results were also found by Riswanto and Haryanto (2012) as well as Sa'diah, Apriliaswati, and Novita (2015) in which drilling practice took place in the classroom (see also Hamzah & Cheang, 2017; Hamzah, Nashuha, & Abdullah, 2017).

In the current study, drilling is assumed to be beneficial for learners to improve their English pronunciation, especially among IE speakers who

tend to replace the initial /w/ sound with the /v/ sound. The main purpose of the study was to explore the improvement of English pronunciation by using communicative drilling techniques such as association drill, saturation, mobility drill, comparative drill, and substitution drill.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In the present study, an explanatory sequential design was chosen as a type of a mixed-methods research design. A survey (via questionnaires), which provided the quantitative data, was first conducted, followed by a series of interviews, which provided the qualitative data of the study. The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data may provide a general picture of the research problem, while qualitative data may further refine, extend, and explain the general picture (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The study was mainly conducted in Universiti Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The participants were 42 Malaysian Indian students who, at the time of the study, pursued their studies at different levels (Diploma or Degree) and different courses or programmes. Purposeful sampling was adapted in selecting the respondents for the questionnaires. We intentionally chose and selected this particular group of participants in order to understand the linguistic phenomenon (i.e., /w/ versus /v/). To be specific, homogenous sampling was applied based on the participants' membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics. The participants were selected based on their study place and, most importantly, their race, i.e., they were Indian students of Malaysian citizenship.

Next, probability sampling was used to choose participants for the interview sessions. We selected five individuals who were the representatives of the questionnaire participants. Convenience sampling was also exercised as we selected the participants based on their willingness and availability. In sampling the participants, the issue of stereotyping might occur as a result of grouping the participants



together. However, the participants were informed about the objectives and purposes of the study. They were also informed about the benefits that might be obtained from the results of the study.

Before distributing the questionnaires, we requested for permission and explained to the participants about the anonymity and confidentiality of being a participant. Upon choosing the five participants for the interview sessions, we re-explained the anonymity and confidentiality of being a participant so as to ensure the participants' comfort in answering the interview questions. The participants were also reminded not to disclose any sensitive issues and information.

Materials

There were eight questions in the questionnaire set (see the findings section). Interview sessions were conducted to the selected five participants. They were separated and were interviewed in different sessions. The questions asked in the interview sessions were prepared before the interview sessions started. There were two general questions for the participants. In average, the sessions lasted for approximately ten minutes for each participant. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Have you ever encountered any difficulty in pronouncing English words with the initial /w/ sound? For example, the word "we". If yes, why is it so? What makes it difficult for you to pronounce the words with the /w/ sound?
2. Drilling is one of the methods in teaching pronunciation. In a drilling process, learners are asked to repeat the words, phrases or sentences stated by a teacher for a few times. In your opinion, do you think drilling is beneficial in improving your pronunciation? If yes, why is it so?

The use of both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) data indicated the existence of triangulation. In meeting the standard of data triangulation, we utilised two sources of data, namely the questionnaires and the interviews. Specifically, data triangulation was used to

ensure the validity of the study. Data triangulation is needed in improving "inquiries by collecting and converging (or integrating) different kinds of data bearing on the same phenomenon" (Creswell, 2014, p. 3).

Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed to 42 participants and they were given one day to return the completed questionnaires. We employed one-on-one interview sessions, in which the data collection took place in a way that we asked questions and recorded the answers from only one participant at a time. Although it was time-consuming, it was a relevant choice of choosing a one-on-one interview as it was an ideal instrument in eliciting and obtaining deeper understanding of the central issues. Furthermore, the participants felt more confident and comfortable to provide their point of views and opinions without the presence of other participants. There were five students who participated in the interview sessions, and they were selected from the participants who answered the questionnaires. The data from both questionnaires and interview sessions were analysed and the conclusion was deduced based on the results.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were processed and analysed using descriptive statistical analyses. The respondents' answers for each of the questions were manually calculated in the percentage form in order to identify the general picture of the addressed issues. The interview sessions were recorded and transcribed so as to identify the key points as well as the related themes based on the participants' responses. We used a specific interview protocol, which was a form that guided us on the instructions for the process of the interview and the questions asked. The data gained from the transcriptions were sorted out and analysed so as to categorise the responses into certain expected answers or themes and to obtain a better grasp of the issues raised in the study. Both types of data from the questionnaires and the interview sessions were then re-analysed and re-studied in order to complete the data analysis process as well as



to reach the conclusion whether the results met the research questions or not.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Section A of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked general questions regarding the pronunciation learning. The results for Questions 1 and 2 are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. In Section B, the respondents were asked on the aspect of pronunciation, which is the initial /w/ sound being replaced with the /v/ sound. The results for Questions 3 and 4 are shown in Figures 3 and 4, respectively. For Question 3, 61.9% of the respondents believe that they encounter some difficulties in pronouncing the initial /w/ sound, while 38.1% of them claim otherwise. Meanwhile, for Question 4, 92.9% of the respondents agree that they unintentionally replace the initial /w/ sound with the /v/ sound, and the remaining 7.1% did not replace the initial /w/ sound at all. Next, for Question 5 (see Figure 5), out of five options, only three were chosen: "Strongly Agree" (52.4%), "Agree" (40.5%), and "Neither Agree nor Disagree" (7.1%). None of the

respondents disagree nor strongly disagree with Question 5.

In Section C of the questionnaires, the respondents were asked three questions on drilling techniques and their implementation (see Figures 6, 7 and 8). As shown in Figure 6 for Question 6, 66.7% of the respondents experience drilling techniques in English classrooms, and 33.3% of them are not exposed to drilling in school. Question 7 asked the respondents to choose one of five options with regard to the implementation of drilling techniques in the classroom. The options are "Boring", "Helpful", "Easy to Understand", "Interesting", "Ineffective", and "Confusing". None of the respondents chose "Ineffective" and "Confusing" since drilling is "Easy to Understand" (33.3%), "Helpful" (28.6%), and "Interesting" (23.8%). However, 14.3% of the respondents thought that drilling is "Boring". Finally, for Question 8, the respondents were asked whether drilling helps them improve their pronunciation. The results show that 57.1% of the respondents chose "A Bit", 21.4% chose "Fairly", 19.1% chose "A Lot", and only 2.4% chose "Not Helping at All".

Do you think learning pronunciation gives any benefit in the mastery of English language?

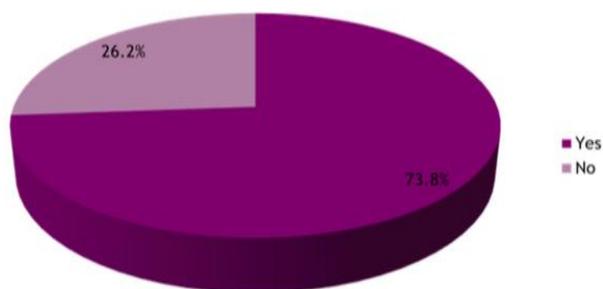


Figure 1- Results from Question 1

Do you think learning pronunciation is as important as learning other skills?

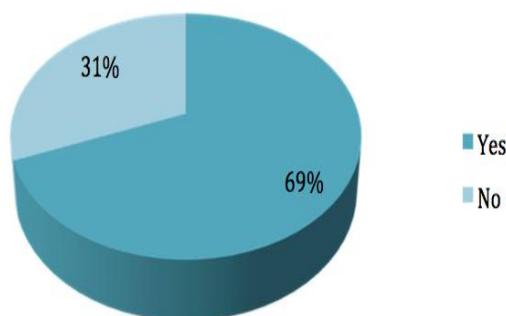


Figure 2 - Results from Question 2



Have you ever encountered any difficulty in pronouncing the initial /w/ sound ?



Figure 3 - Results from Question 3

Have you unintentionally replaced the initial /w/ sound with /v/ sound in pronouncing English words (e.g. "we" with "ve")?



Figure 4 - Results from Question 4

The difficulty of pronouncing initial /w/ sound is a problem among Indian students.

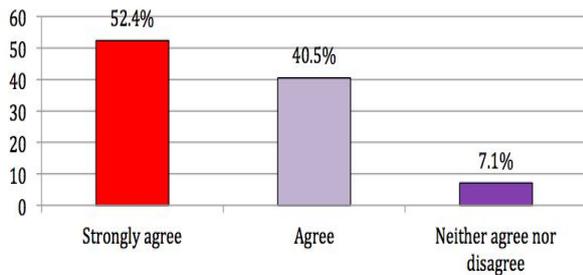


Figure 5 - Results from Question 5

Have you ever experienced drilling technique in any of your English classroom ?

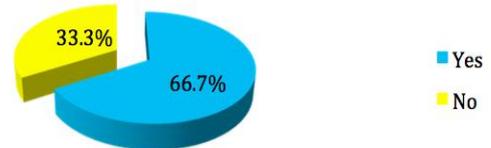


Figure 6 - Results from Question 6

What do you think about Drilling technique?

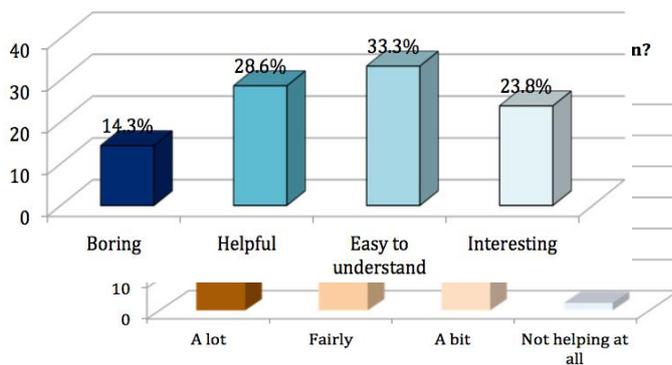


Figure 7 - Results from Question 7

Does this technique help you in learning pronunciation?

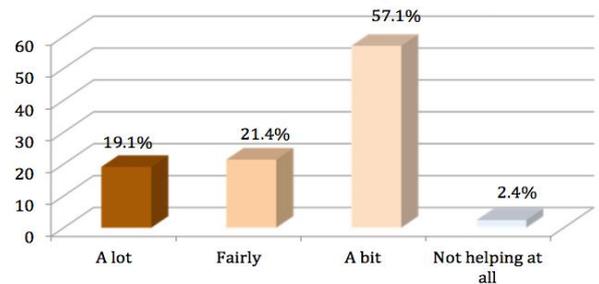


Figure 8 - Results from Question 8



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed to investigate the aspects of pronunciation among Malaysian Indian students in Universiti Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in pronouncing the initial /w/ sound. It was hypothesised that there would be the expected interchangeable nature between the initial /w/ sound and the /v/ sound in pronouncing English words. Furthermore, this study was intended to determine the respondents' perception on drilling techniques in learning English pronunciation. Based on the results, most of the respondents were aware of the distinction between /w/ and /v/ sounds. They also tended to pronounce the initial /w/ sound with the /v/ sound.

English educators and syllabus designers have struggled in searching the most effective way in teaching pronunciation as they are no specific methods and techniques in ensuring the mastery of English pronunciation lessons. Some might claim that drilling is a traditional method in teaching English. Nevertheless, drilling might still be relevant as the respondents in the current study have favourable responses towards this technique. That is, drilling is at least essential in helping them distinguish between the /w/ and /v/ sounds.

In extending this study to a bigger scale, future researchers may conduct an experimental research in which the instruments employed in the current may be expanded to, for example, a pre-test and post-test design. The respondents' performance in pronunciation may be gauged using several diagnostic tests that may serve as a pre-test. They may be asked to read certain words or phrases containing the minimal pairs of /w/ versus /v/ sounds, such as "wine" and "vine". In this experimental research, future researchers may implement the drilling techniques, which act as a treatment for the aforementioned pronunciation issues. The drilling techniques may perhaps be varied with different types of drilling such as the repetition drill, the substitution drill, the question and answer drill, the transformation drill, the chain drill, the expansion drill and the communicative drill. After a few sessions of drilling techniques in the classroom, a

post-test may be conducted for the respondents using minimal pairs in order to identify the outcome and the results of the treatment. It is hoped that the findings will further contribute to English pronunciation teaching and learning among diverse groups of English learners.

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