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### **Improving Pronunciation in the English Language Through Linguistic Mimicry Approach**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study tries to improve the pronunciation of the students of the Mindanao State University (MSU) known as the “Melting Pot of the South”. Students of different cultures with different dialects interact with one another, however pronunciation in the English language has been a great challenge to them and their teachers. Thus, ways on how to improve pronunciation have been considered. Based on the many studies related to the topic, Linguistic Mimicry Approach is considered one of the best approaches.

*Keywords:* Pronunciation, Linguistic Mimicry Approach, Multicultural

#### **Introduction**

It cannot be denied that English has played a crucial role in all parts of the world. In speaking a particular language, one has to be conscious of the content and of course the delivery of the words. A person’s fluency and accuracy in the English language gives him more confidence to interact with people. Many people, however have difficulty in attaining fluency and accuracy. In most cases, if a person is having a difficulty in pronouncing words of the English language, his self esteem is lowered and might not be understood by people. It might even bring trouble and negative effect on people’s relationships.

Mindanao State University (MSU), known as the “Melting Pot of the South” offers education to learners of different cultures. Tausugs, Maranaos, Iranaons, Maguindanaons, Surigaonons, Cebuanos, Tagalogs, and many others communicate, deal and interact with one another. These different cultures are proud of their identity and dialect. With this, the students of MSU are multilingual; they speak this and that. Even if they learn many dialects, they are still masters of their own dialects but this fact has challenged the learners and teachers to develop and improve their pronunciation, since the sound of the English language is very far from their native languages or dialects. Their pronunciation has been greatly affected by their native tongue. This, in some cases, has affected them negatively.

Quoted below are some experiences of the students of MSU:

*“People laugh at me when I mispronounce a word. This lowered my self esteem but also strengthened my will to pronounce well.” -Filipino Tausug student*

*“I mispronounced a word and my classmates laughed. I felt so embarrassed and insulted, in a way. Maybe they laughed at me because they thought I know nothing.” - Filipino Maranao student*

*“Sometimes, the accent and pronunciation of my students hinder our communication. There are times that I have to let him/her repeat what he/she has said.” - English teacher*

Aside from our students in the university, some students from different places felt the same way.

Quoted below are some of students’ experiences (Goodwin, 1996):

*“I feel that I am judged by my way of talking English. In other classes, teachers often treat me as inferior or academic disability because of the muttering English.” -*

Undergraduate student in an ESL pronunciation course

*“Sometime when I speak to native American, I guess because of my Chinese a sense or mispronunciate the word, they ask me to repeat, or I beg your pardon. Sometime my face turn red, and become so embarrassed in front of them. I remembered once my tears were in my eyes.” - Graduate student in an ESL pronunciation course*

These experiences, somehow pushed the idea of really focusing on pronouncing or articulating the words correctly. One of the ways seen in mind is to practice articulating and pronouncing through listening and role playing. Learning and teaching English takes time and effort since it is our second language. Indeed, the field of second (or foreign) language teaching has undergone many fluctuations and shifts over the years (Celce-Murcia, 2006). Learning it as a process is clearly different compared with the first language learning in its trial-and-error nature (Brown, 2000).

The researcher got interested with the study because she wants to make a better way of teaching English in her classes, which include her Oral Communication classes.

### **Main text**

Concepts and theories concerning listening and speaking are used in this study. These concepts and theories served as the framework of this study. They are Stephen Krashen’s **Monitor Hypothesis** which explains the innate ability of a person to monitor himself, and **Comprehensible Input Hypothesis** which explains acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language, and **Linguistic Mimicry Approach** of Karen Yates which explains how dramatic techniques improve learners’ articulation because of its non-threatening nature.

### **Monitor Hypothesis**

According to Krashen, monitor hypothesis states that “learning has only one function, and that is as ‘Monitor or editor’ and that learning comes into play only to ‘make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been ‘produced’ by the acquired system.”

Acquisition ‘initiates’ the speaker’s utterances and is responsible for fluency. Thus the Monitor is thought to alter the output of the acquired system before or after the utterance is actually written or spoken, but the utterance is initiated entirely by the acquired system (Mitchell and Myles, cited in Jali, 2013).

### **Comprehensible Input Hypothesis**

Comprehensible input means that students should be able to understand the essence of what is being said or presented to them. By using context or visual cues, or by asking for clarification, students enhance their knowledge of English. One way teachers can

ensure that material is sufficiently comprehensible is to provide relevant background knowledge and content, and one way for teachers to be sensitive to the language and cultural backgrounds of their English-language learners with learning difficulties is to provide instruction that draws on the experiences of their students. Moreover, teachers must constantly involve students, ask many questions, and encourage students to express their ideas and thoughts in the new language.

Thus, it is important to realize that comprehensible input is as much an ideal as it is an achievable reality. In teaching English-language learners with learning difficulties, we can attempt to reach this ideal level of support and challenge, but in the context of complex and fast-paced classroom interactions, it may rarely be achieved as much as we would like. Nonetheless, this is a critical principle as you develop an instructional program for each English-language learner (Russell Gersten, Scott K. Baker, and Susan Unok Marks, 1999).

### **Linguistic Mimicry Approach**

In Linguistic Mimicry Approach, students memorize scripts from short segments of television shows via video and ultimately perform simultaneously with the video while linguistically mimicking the actor they are portraying. Mimicry in this context is defined as students imitating an actor's every segmental and suprasegmental utterance as well as every physical gesture and facial movement as exactly as possible. It provides teachers with a method to teach students how to internalize suprasegmentals first; later factors such as vowel and syllable stress and phrasing can be introduced and analyzed. Additionally, through dramatic techniques, Linguistic Mimicry provides a non-threatening environment that lowers anxiety and inhibitions and creates a safe environment to integrate the pronunciation of the L2 into the student's personality. Finally, to reinforce learning, communicative exercises through role play while staying in character are used to allow practice of the acquired rhythm and movements of English (Yates, 2003).

According to Yates, "most people, given sufficient input, can imitate other dialects of their first language as well as some foreign accents; however, there is usually a reluctance to do so as they can be perceived as rude. There are domains in which the use of these accents is permitted: in plays and jokes, for example. Even in these situations, however, their use is sensitive. In plays, dialects must be rendered very accurately, and in jokes their use can be demeaning. It is the job of the instructor to inform L2 students that imitating in L2 is not deemed rude and helps the listener. With an ability to mimic the L2, students can turn on and off the L2 accent to adapt to the situation in which they find themselves."

Based on personal experience, if a person tries to imitate someone, he can actually do it, given the model to imitate. Even when we are watching our favorite shows, or movies, if we like the line of a particular artist, we sometimes imitate him/her and this imitation is, if not perfect, close to perfection.

### **Teaching Articulation and Pronunciation**

It is during articulation that sounds produced in the earlier steps are turned into understandable speech. The organs in your body that work as articulators are the tongue, lips, teeth, and hard and soft palates. These organs shape and separate your sounds into words. The articulators also select and change the path of the air. They can send the air through the nose or mouth (Alcuizar, et al 2014).

Views on teaching pronunciation have changed dramatically over the last half-century of language teaching. In the heyday of audio-lingualism and its various behavioristic methodological variants, the pronunciation component of a course in our

program was a mainstay. Language was viewed as a hierarchy of related structures and at the base of this hierarchy was the articulation of phonemes and their contrasts within English and between English and native language. Oral English classes consisted of imitation drills, memorization of patterns, minimal pair exercises. In the 1970s', as the language teaching profession began to experience a revolution of sorts, explicit pedagogical focus on anything that smacked of linguistic nuts and bolts was under siege by proponents of the various non- directive, "let-it-just-happen" approaches to language teaching. As we became more concerned with authenticity, real-world tasks, naturalness, non-directive teaching, and process, we became less concerned with the product: language itself. Pronunciation instruction became somewhat incidental to a course of study. It was not ignored entirely, but in the interest of promoting fluency-based instruction, accuracy-based focus on English phonology became, for many, an afterthought. By the mid 1980s', the cutting edge of the profession turned in a different direction. With greater attention to grammatical structures as important elements in discourse, to a balance between fluency and accuracy, and to the explicit specification of pedagogical tasks that a learner should accomplish, it became clear that pronunciation was a key to gaining full communicative competence (Brown,1994). But the current approach to pronunciation starkly contrasts with the early approaches. Rather than attempting only to build a learner's articulatory competence from the bottom up, a top- down approach is taken in which the most relevant features of pronunciation—stress, rhythm, and intonation—are given high priority. Instead of teaching only the role of articulation within words, or at best, phrases, we teach its role in a whole stream of discourse.

Rita Wong (1987:21) reminds us that:

...contemporary views (of language) hold that the sounds of language are less crucial for understanding than the way they are organized. The rhythm and intonation of English are two major organizing structures that native speakers rely on to process speech.... Because of their major roles in communication, rhythm and intonation merit greater priority in the teaching program than attention to individual sounds. Wong's comments reflect an approach that puts all aspects of English pronunciation into the perspective of communicative, interactive, whole language view of human speech (Zhang, 2009).

### **Problem 1. How does listening affect pronunciation?**

Hearing is often interchanged with listening. We ask our students, "Do you understand?" and they would answer with a big yes but if we try to test them, they cannot answer back because they were just hearing and not listening. Hearing is just a matter of letting the sound waves pass through your ears, listening, on the other hand, is understanding what is heard. Thus, as teachers, we are responsible to make our students understand the difference between the two. The chunks of words are combined and given meanings. If we ask the question, "Does listening affect pronunciation?" The answer is, Yes, it does. But if the question is, "Does hearing affect pronunciation?" The answer is unsure.

Listening serves the goal of extracting meaning from messages. The role of listening in a language program is to help develop learners' abilities to understand things they listen to. Listening does not only develop learners' ability to understand things but to improve their pronunciation as well.

Schmidt (1990:139) further clarifies this point in distinguishing between input (what the learner hears) and intake (that part of the input that the learner notices). Only intake can serve as the basis for language development. In his own study of his acquisition of

Portuguese (Schmidt and Frota 1986), Schmidt found that there was a close connection between his noticing features of the input and their later emergence in his own speech. However, for language development to take place, more is required than simply noticing features of the input. The learner has to try to incorporate new linguistic items into his or her language repertoire, that is, to use them in oral production. This involves processes that have been variously referred to as restructuring, complexification, and producing stretched output. VanPatten (1993: 436) suggests that restructuring refers to: . . . those [processes] that mediate the incorporation of intake into the developing system. Since the internalization of intake is not mere accumulation of discrete bits of data, data have to “fit in” in some way and sometimes the accommodation of a particular set of data causes changes in the rest of the system. Complexification and stretching of output occurs in contexts . . . where the learner needs to produce output which the current interlanguage system cannot handle . . . [and so] . . . pushes the limits of the interlanguage system to handle that output (Tarone and Liu 1995: 120–121).

In the case of the students of the researcher, listening has positively affected their pronunciation skills. When they have understood, and internalized the thing they listened to, it remains in their mind and it becomes easier for them to be reminded of the word they have listened to.

Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis brings listening-based methods together. Acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language, he claims. Listening is motivated by the need to get messages out of what is heard. Foreign language learners acquire a new language by hearing in contexts where the meaning is made plain to them. Ideally, the speech they hear has enough ‘old’ language, and makes enough sense in the context for the new language to be understood and absorbed. In contrast with listening, speaking is an output process. Krashen’s Input Hypothesis shows us the significance of listening to speaking as well as the way of choosing appropriate listening and audio-visual materials for our oral English class. Appropriate listening and audio-visual materials can make students’ pronunciation more native-like by getting access to authentic, real life listening and audio-visual materials, students can develop their cultural competence which enables them to respond with behaviors that are socially appropriate to the setting, the status of the interlocutors, the purpose, key, genre, and instrumentalities of the exchange, and the norms of interaction agreed upon by native speakers. In other words, learners will be able to better understand the speaking customs and ways of life of the target country, and thus behave more appropriately in native-speaker environments (Zhang, 2003).

### **Problem 2. Has the intervention improved students’ pronunciation?**

From the 1990s to the present, there has been a shift to a communicative approach in ESL pronunciation instruction which requires teaching methods and objectives that include ‘whole-person learner involvement’ (Morely, cited in Yates, 2000) with a greater emphasis on teaching competent pronunciation to develop functional intelligibility, communicability, increased self-confidence, the development of speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom.

In Oral Communication classes, International Phonetic Alphabet is taught to them. Exercises in transcribing and reading transcription are given to the students to test their knowledge on the correct sound of the words but the most common problem among our English learners is that no matter how accurate the international phonetic alphabet may be, we cannot produce accurate pronunciation because of the influence of “accent” of our

native language. Some English phones don't exist in the Filipino language and the different dialects used by the many students MSU. Because of this, it is natural for our students to find some similar sounds to replace the real one. The sound of /æ/ is almost always changed with /a/ and /ʌ/. Say for example, can /kæn/ becomes /kʌn/ or that the word sit /sIt/ becomes /sɛt/. These are just some of the few errors made by the students.

Besides improving their pronunciation of words, perfecting the relevant features of pronunciation, i.e. stress, rhythm, and intonation is also a very important task for college students who aim at speaking more authentic native-like English. It really is a difficult task to get rid of the influence of our mother tongue.

The visual and auditory materials (e.g. movie clips) allow the students to monitor themselves. They are able to correct what should be corrected. Since the artists are native-speakers, it is easier for the students to detect something wrong in their speech. With that, the Monitor Hypothesis of Krashen comes into the picture.

Approximating the sounds of the English language is a great challenge to students and teachers. Many methods have been used and integrated in language classes, especially in Oral Communication classes. Drills are still practiced even now and then but students tend to be too conscious of how they pronounce since all eyes and ears are on them, and because of over-monitoring, they stutter and find pronouncing words difficult. The role plays and clips from movies that were re-enacted by the students have improved their pronunciation somehow. Aside from the fact that they have enjoyed what they were doing, their anxiety level has lowered. It was one of the many ways that helped them not to over-monitor themselves since it was fun and seemed like a natural way of interacting with their friends. When they act to be someone else, and when they try to imitate their way of speaking, and their gestures, they get better. Thus, it can be said that Linguistic Mimicry Approach has influenced and improved students pronunciation skill. Their native accent may still be there but it has been reduced to a greater extent.

### Conclusion

Based on the Standard American English, which is used in our curriculum, the students of Oral Communication have improved their pronunciation. The researcher and teacher of Oral Communication can conclude that the difference may not be that much, but the students have improved. We do not learn English to impress people, but to understand and be understood. We may not perfect pronouncing words, but the thought of approximating the sound of the English language is already enough. With the World Englishes coming into sight, the researcher has high hopes that sooner, Filipino English will be standardized to cater the needs of many Filipino learners, that is, Filipino English might not be that far from the native tongues of the learners. Therefore, we can say that learning it might be easier.

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