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Comparing the phonological performance of Kurdish and Persian EFL learners in pronunciation of English vowels

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Abstract

Knowing a second or foreign language is not possible without knowing its sound system. Besides, it is also impossible to disregard the effect of the first language sound system on the pronunciation of sounds of the second. The more these effects disappear, the more native like the learners sound. Accordingly, comparing the sound system of the two languages helps recognize the differences of the languages and sources of feasible errors the learners make which results in decrease the effects of the first language. Thus, this study tried to compare the performance of EFL Kurdish and Persian learners in acquisition of English vowels. In so doing, contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) was applied to compare the vowels of Kurdish and Persian with English. Furthermore, a total of 120 students take part in the study to study any probable differences between the phonological performance of Kurdish and Persian EFL learners at elementary and advanced levels. The results showed some significant differences at the elementary level between the two groups of speakers, though this was not attested at advanced levels. EFL educators can use the results of this research in their pedagogical judgment makings.

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1. Introduction

Communication in second language (L2) is mainly dependent on correct pronunciation correct pronunciation makes our speech understandable and comprehensible to our interlocutors. Even with a rich lexicon in the second

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language and familiarity with the structures and systems of the L2, our messages cannot be expressed correctly without correct pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation (Varol, 2012).

Since second language learner wants to speak L2 like native speakers, they consider pronunciation of the target language as the major indicator of their knowledge about the language. This is because of the decision of native speakers according to the second language learners' ability to correctly create the target language sounds using suitable intonation and rhythm. Consequently, the more similar one's pronunciation is to that of a native speaker, the more likely his speech will be recognized as intelligible and understandable (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

In spite of the critical function of pronunciation in interacting in a second language, it was typically disregarded by language researchers until the audio-lingual method placed an emphasis on listening and speaking. Derwing and Munro (2005) recognized the cause for the lack of emphasis on pronunciation and claimed that "the study of pronunciation has been marginalized in the field of applied linguistics" (p. 379). Thus, linguists were the probable spectators of the research results on this part of study rather than language teachers. Consequently, the reasons influencing the acquisition of second language phonology were not identified correctly. One of these reasons that seriously influences the students' ability and capability of acquiring L2 pronunciation is the kind of communication between L1 and L2 sound systems. To clarify the impact of the first language on L2 acquisition, lots of theories and hypotheses have been proposed so far. Among those, the most influential is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) which contrasts and compares two or more languages through a systematic study so as to forecast and clarify the source of errors that L2 students make using the target language.

Applying CAH to phonology consequences in Contrastive Phonology which is described as "the procedure of contrasting and comparing the phonological systems of languages to create their similarities and differences" (Yarmohammadi 1995:19). Ringbom (1994) states that "the predictions of CA work best" in the field of phonology.

A contrastive analysis plan comprises two parts: describing each of the languages (within the same model) and juxtaposition for comparison (James, 1980). Obviously, the alternative of model in phonology is in some way straightforward for the reason that basically there are two parts: taxonomic phonology and generative phonology. In the present study, the former model is adopted because it is more appropriate for phonological CA, mainly in applied areas. Moreover, Kohler (1971) declares that taxonomic approach works quite well where the main objective is to entail contrastive studies and their practical applications into language teaching. While there are lots of criticisms at CA, two basic ideas of it are still at work: L1 is a main reason in L2 learning and contrast and comparison of two languages can be of great aid in learning the second language (Ringbom 1994; Ellis 2008).

Cook (1999:86) creates the application of Phonological CA even more acceptable when he utters CA is "most successful in the field of pronunciation", Felix (1980) considers that at the phonological level L2 learners begin with their L1 system (quoted in Ioup, 1984). Additionally, Richards (1984) recommends that CA may be most productive at the level of phonology when dealing with the studies of SLA.

2. Statement of the Problem

Due to the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state of Iran, the influence of the students' mother tongue and approved language becomes a more controversial subject in English language learning locations. Lots of languages and dialects are spoken in different parts of the country. One of the languages spoken in the western provinces of Iran is Kurdish. It is almost different from Persian which is the formal and authorized language of the country and is separated into several languages such as Ilami-Kurdish, Oramani Kurdish, etc. This difference is also clear in the sound systems of the two languages. Consequently, a Kurdish learner learning English not only tolerates the influence of Kurdish sound system but also the influence of Persian sound system on the phonological system of English. Thus, the knowledge and familiarity of EFL educators with these differences help the learners in better understanding and processing the target language sound system. One of the best approaches which is also maintained by the literature is the application of CA to recognize the similarity and differences of the languages. Fallahi (1991) also refers to the significance of the application of CA for English plans in Iran because of the obvious L1 interference in EFL settings. All in all, this study first gives a theoretical image of the vowels sound system of Kurdish and Persian and it also discriminates the differences and similarities of the Kurdish and Persian vowels in comparison with English vowels. At the practical stage, it examines the phonological performance of Kurdish and Persian speakers of EFL learners in elementary and advanced levels to inspect the sounds that speakers

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