

Rhythm and Stress at Practice: Rhythmic Anomalies of Foreign Speakers of English : A Case Study of Mostaganem University Students

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Abstract: Today, more than ever, languages are becoming more and more an essential means for the human kind to get in touch with each other and/or to improve his professional situation. Indeed, learning has always been basic for the shaping of social life and so have foreign languages. Knowing a foreign language implies speaking and being understood by others who know that language. Learning a foreign language implies learning a foreign culture, a foreign way of thinking, a foreign grammatical structure, a foreign phonological system. However, knowing the phonological sound system of a language includes knowing more than the phonemic inventory of sounds, it includes knowing which sound start the word, end a word and the possible consonant clusters, the syllable structure, etc. Most foreign language learners of English aim at achieving a perfect native-like pronunciation as well as displaying a certain degree of fluency and naturalness as they speak English. The great majority of foreign learners centre their attention on the actualization of individual segments that is achieved by a tedious repetition of sounds/ phonemes of the target language in isolation or within simple words. However, a relative mastery of the English pronunciation lies in mastering what the American phoneticians call: supra-segmental features, and the British call: the prosodic features. As a way of illustrating, one can mention stress, intonation and rhythm. The latter is said to be of significant importance in the sense that it procures a native touch to the speech of a foreign learner of English. That was stressed by a number of phoneticians and specialists, as Peter Roach, who states clearly that « rhythm is not an optional extra; it is all part of the prosodic package of being native speaker in English ». Indeed, the ignorance or the neglect of such a prosodic feature which shows to be of a significant importance seems to be at the roots of the difficulties foreign learners face while speaking English. In this respect, two main questions are addressed in this paper. What are, then, the main problems learners of English face while learning and / or acquiring English rhythm (knowing and mastering English rhythm will be brought to the fore in this paper). Furthermore, in this paper, rhythmic structure of Arabic and English will be compared to try to explore the possibilities of finding the reasons lying beneath the mispronunciation or the mis-reproduction of English rhythm by Arabic speakers. Although Arabic and English rhythmic modes are said to be similar to each other, Arabic speakers of English tend to miss the amount of reduction in duration (of unstressed syllables) and thus seem somehow unable to master the English rhythm fully and achieve thus a native like pronunciation. Put differently, although English and Arabic are said to be stress- timed languages, the Arabic learners of English still have difficulties in reproducing correct English rhythm. It should be interesting to explore further the sources lying beneath that incompetency.

Key Words: Arabic rhythm, English rhythm, stress-timed, stress

1-Introduction:

Foreign learners of English, almost all over the world, strive to sound like native speakers and display a certain degree of fluency and naturalness as they speak. Students and to a certain extent even teachers believe that this could be achieved through a tedious repetition of isolated elements known as phonemes and struggle to actualize them in a native-like manner ignoring, much to their dismay, that this would not be of a great help. Lacking important elements about what is known as the prosodic features may hinder the mastery of the pronunciation and a native touch dreamt of by almost all foreign students. Stress and rhythm are two important features that one should have knowledge of and/or at least be aware of when native fluency is sought. As put by Peter Roach in his lecture on rhythm and production, “*Rhythm is not an optional extra; it’s all part of the prosodic package of being native speaker of English*”. Thus speaking a language requires not just knowing and mastering the phonemes of that language but also knowing the patterns of timing and accentuation typical to the flow of syllables in sentences, the ignorance and the neglect of which can be at the roots of much of the difficulties of foreign learners while speaking English, for instance. Linguists and phonologists have been and still are fascinated and interested by the speech and by that item that maintains regularity dubbed rhythm. The traditional descriptions of speech rhythm identified two types of rhythmic structures of languages: stress-timed languages (like: English, Arabic, Russian) and syllable-timed languages (like: French and Spanish). See (Pike: 1945; Jones: 1948; Abercrombie: 1967). This distinction was based on impressionistic, auditory description. To those two categories was added another type, another rhythmic structure namely: mora-timed languages (e.g., Japanese). The present study considers the problems students of the English department of Mostaganem University-Algeria-face with regard to the pronunciation of English and in reproducing the correct rhythm or at least approximating a native-like production of rhythm ensuring an isochronous occurrence of stressed units. Although, English and Arabic are said to cluster within the same classification as stress-timed languages, it would be interesting to see how come that the Algerian students who are native speakers of Arabic (a North African Arabic dialect (Algerian Arabic) classified as stress-timed just as English is) encounter problems in reproducing the correct rhythm? What are the reasons that may lie beneath this “incompetency”? What can be done to remedy for these anomalies?

2- The Notion of Rhythm and Rhythmic Structures of English and Arabic

The term rhythm derives from the Greek word *rhythmos* meaning “measured motion”. In general rhythm refers to a regulated flow of movement which can be either aural or visual. It represents the principle of succession. Rhythm tends to manifest its presence in every matter relating to man, whether directly or indirectly from the regular beating of human heart, the breathing of a silent animal to the ticking of the clock. Rhythm is the underlying feature of all arts including music, poetry, or meter just as it is also exhibited in natural phenomena as : day and night, sleeping and waking, the seasonal changes, tides, etc. Not forgetting to mention speech. Speech rhythm has been described by linguists as a set of varying patterns related to periodicity and emphasis and which govern the phonation of syllables in an utterance. (See Patel: 2008). Rhythm thus represents an effect of isochronous recurrence of some speech units (stressed syllable or individual units). Allowing thus a well-known dichotomy of languages according to their rhythmic structure: stress-timed and syllable-timed to which was added another one dubbed mora-timed (a best example of mora- languages is Japanese) introduced by Han, 1968; Hoquist, 1983. A number of studies were carried out by many phoneticians to try to prove the distinction in the rhythmic structure of languages which was a distinction made on the basis of auditory impressions. Roach tried to study some languages acoustically known to belong to different rhythmic categories, starting from the results of Pike and Abercrombie. Roach failed to show measureable differences between these languages. Later, a research study was conducted by Tajima, Port and Zaydaweh. The group has studied the rhythmic structure of Arabic, Japanese and English, using a technique known as speech cycling. What was interesting in their study, as far as this paper is concerned, is that part of study which is devoted to see to which extent two languages which belong to the same rhythmic category have the same rhythmic structure?

The study was conducted upon Arabic subjects speaking a Middle East dialect (Ammani-Jordanian accent). The results were compared to English and Japanese; I was interested in the study in the sense that I wanted to try that on my students who are native speakers of an Arabic dialect, more precisely, a North African dialect representing along with the Morocco Arabic the western pole of a continuum of the Arabic language. It would be interesting to see to which extent does that apply to the Arabic speakers of the North African dialect. What are the conclusions that one can draw?

3-Method

To consider the questions addressed above, I conducted a case study on students (3rd students and Master students) of the department of English Studies of Mostaganem University. On the basis of my observations, readings, open-ended, structured interviews asking for the informants’ opinions and

questionnaires addressed to the students, a maximum of data was collected. Since the case study is an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, I relied heavily on my own observations (and that of my colleagues and even some of the students) of the students at practice. I recorded and videotaped the students in phonetics and phonological classes after being ensured that the students has already dealt with stress and rhythm, or at least are aware of such phenomena. I then tried to apply “innocently” or “naively” the speech cycling task: asking five students two males and three females to repeat short phrases; varying in each phrase the number of syllables but keeping the same rhythm unit. A metronome was used as a stimulus to incite the subjects to be highly rhythmical or at least to maintain rhythm while repeating the phrases. The subjects were given seven phrases to repeat in English and then in Algerian Arabic. All the subjects had a good mastery of English (including a good pronunciation) and were very fluent in French. The repetitions of the phrases were recorded, and then were played to native English native French speakers to listen to.

4- Results and discussion:

In almost 57% of the cases the listeners succeeded to identify the Algerian accent (Algerian rhythm) reading Arabic phrases, especially by French listeners. Native speakers of English, and they were few, did manage to identify the speakers of English (subjects) as foreign speakers of English belonging to North African speakers but hesitated to decide whether they were Moroccans or Algerians.

However, native speakers of English could identify some anomalies with regard to the correct production of rhythm in English (spoken by the subjects) as well as stress placement. Obviously, I noticed that in my students even among the most competent ones. This fact may be drawn to the influence of stress placement of Arabic on the North African Arabic speakers. Indeed stress placement in Arabic, as was mentioned by Hayes (1995), is purely a cognitive entity, as he puts it, which can be actualized or given various physical shapes. Kenneth de Jong and Adnan Bushra Zawaydeh has worked in their article entitled: “*Stress Duration and Intonation in Arabic word-level prosody*” in which they beautifully show how stress placement shifts in the word depending on the dialect of Arabic spoken, sometimes on the penultimate syllable and sometimes on the antepenultimate syllable and that was particularly difficult to determine because it depends on the analytical theory which is used. But then, the dialect that was used in their study was that of Ammani-Jordanian Arabic. To which extent would that apply to Algerian students? On the basis of the observations made which were basically, impressionistic and auditory, the subjects (Algerian students in this case study tend to speak quickly and tend to reduce the long vowels which would result in the majority of time in complex syllable structures. A more accurate research work was conducted by Hamdi and Barkat in the university of Lyon 2.

5- Conclusion:

As a way of concluding, one would say that this study was just an attempt to verify the degree of naturalness in the English language being a foreign language spoken by Algerian students in the department of English Studies of the university of Mostaganem. It must be underlined that the result obtained were highly impressionistic that is they were based on the auditory clues and impressions of non-native and native speakers of English on the production of English as a foreign language by non-natives and a way of thinking about some solutions to remedy for the incompetency that we encounter in our classes and why not hope that these issues will be dealt with and taken into consideration by other researchers with more technical backgrounds using more scientific methods to get to the core of the matter and hopefully draw generalizations to remedy for such problems.

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