

Enhancing Pronunciation Through Imitation: A Pilot Study Among Undergraduates of Technical University

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Abstract: A good communication ability in English is important for everyone including students, employees and even employers. There are many aspects of communication such as pronunciation that require attention in order to improve the overall ability in communication. One of the ways to improve pronunciation is by using imitation technique. Thus, this study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by the university students in pronouncing English words well. A total of 51 respondents from a technical university in Malaysia participated in this pilot study. A questionnaire was distributed to the respondents via Google Form. The data was collected and analysed thoroughly to investigate the pronunciation challenges among the respondents and the effectiveness of imitation technique. It was found that the majority of the respondents feared being belittled due to wrong pronunciation that they chose not to communicate much. The study also found that most of the respondents were in favour of the imitation technique to improve their pronunciation skills. Thus, the study is hoped to enhance the pronunciation ability among the university students in order to improve their overall communication skills.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Communication, Imitation Technique, University Students.

1. Introduction

Effective communication is one of the most important life skills to possess as it will be useful in every aspect of life including personal and career development. Communication skills involve spoken and written encounters. In some places, including the Philippines, the abilities to communicate to both native and non-native speakers of English highlight the capacity of a person to create relationships and involve in socialization (Separa, Generales, & Medina, 2020). Through effective communication

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skills, one can be understood well and the objective of having the communication will be achieved. Many speakers of English assess their accomplishment in language learning according to their advancement in the communication ability (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). On the other hand, inadequate communication skills may result in misunderstandings and dissatisfaction which is undesirable.

Communication is the engine that propels workplace success. Nowadays, many business transactions happen due to successful communication. Thus, it is very important to make sure that the other party obtains the message accurately so that business can take place. If the communication involves oral discussion, then, the speakers should ensure that they pronounce the words correctly and properly to avoid misunderstanding or losing business opportunities. Thus, having the knowledge of language vocabulary with the correct pronunciation is crucial for students and workers to excel in their disciplines respectively (Bakar & Abdullah, 2015). Pronouncing words is the best approach to increase one's capacity to communicate successfully with others through imitation technique. However, numerous studies highlighted the negligence of speaking lessons in the classroom where the speaking activity is more commonly conducted by the teachers compared to the students (Al Nakhalah, 2016).

Pronunciation is important as it is required in our daily activities and conversations. As a matter of fact, pronunciation is one of the difficult impediments that second language learners face in mastering the English language (Cenoz & Lecumberri, 1999). In order to have a good understanding of speech process and pronunciation activities, it is important to identify the speech errors that may occur (Munro, 2018). In this regard, some students are even afraid to speak and communicate in English mainly because they fear of being laughed at or insulted because of their mispronunciations. Proper pronunciation is also important as incorrect pronunciation may lead to misinformation or misunderstanding among two or more parties. Next, learning pronunciation is important as native speakers or other countries may pronounce certain words differently than us. Therefore, the knowledge of various types of pronunciation is also vital.

Nevertheless, pronouncing words correctly is only one aspect of expressing effectively in English and there are many ways of learning proper pronunciation. Researchers suggested that by imitating the native English speaker's pronunciation, intonation, facial emotions, and gestures, it can help one to communicate naturally. The imitation technique of a native English speaker allows the learner to strengthen his or her knowledge in terms of the sound and symbols and becomes successful in learning the language more effectively (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010). In addition, learners are also able to learn the structure of the language and vocabulary by imitating. Researchers speculated that even young learners may understand how the language components function and what they mean by imitating the language around them (Ibarrola, 2011). Thus, imitating technique can be very useful in learning proper pronunciation in English for students (Trofimovich, 2016). Therefore, this research is conducted to study the effectiveness of pronouncing words in English through imitation among the university students.

2. Materials and Methods

This pilot study consisted of a series of steps or actions that are necessary to execute the study effectively. Firstly, the research problem was identified and this research was the basis for solving those problems. After that, a questionnaire for this research was adapted and it underwent the stage of pretest for further refinement. The questionnaire was distributed to the third-year undergraduates who took up an English course at a technical university in Malaysia. 51 university students responded to the questionnaire. Next, the data was analysed. Finally, the interpreted result was combined and reported.

3. Results and Discussion

A set of questionnaires were given to the third-year students majoring in Bachelor of Technology Management (Construction), Faculty of Technology and Business Management through an online platform. 51 respondents participated in this survey. After obtaining the data from the questionnaire, the researchers evaluated the data obtained to address the objectives of this study. The questionnaire was divided into two parts, namely Part I and Part II. The following sections will discuss further on each part.

3.1 Part I - General Overview

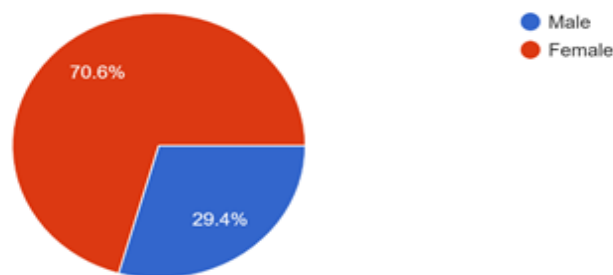


Figure 1: Gender of the respondents

Based on Figure 1, 36 respondents (70.6%) were female students and 15 (29.4%) respondents were male students. This study found that more female students responded to the questionnaire than the male students.

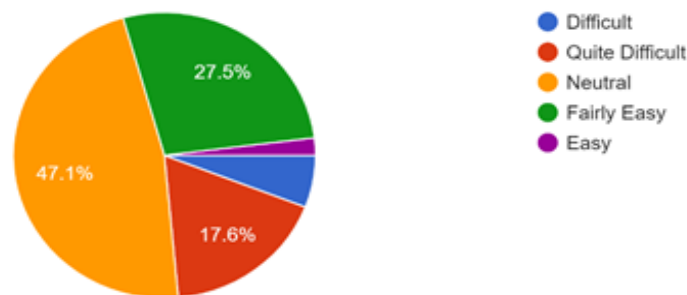


Figure 2: Respondents' views on the usage of English in daily communication

Figure 2 shows that most of the respondents (47.1%) chose 'neutral' as their views of using English in daily communication, in which 24 respondents thought that speaking in English was neither easy nor difficult. Nevertheless, there were also some respondents who stated that speaking in English was relatively simple. This can be proven from the data in Figure 2 where 14 respondents (27.5%) stated that it was 'fairly easy' and one respondent (2%) stated that speaking English was easy. In addition, there were also respondents who thought speaking in English was quite difficult (17.6%) and difficult (6.4%).

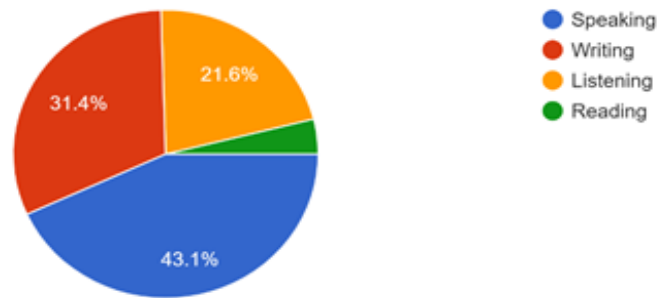


Figure 3: Toughest skill to master

Based on Figure 3, 22 respondents (43.1%) chose that speaking was the toughest skill to master. The second toughest skill chosen was writing with 16 respondents (31.4%). Next, there were 11 respondents (21.6%) who chose listening as the toughest skill and followed by 2 respondents (3.9%) choosing reading as the toughest skill to master. The findings showed that most of the respondents felt that speaking was the toughest skill to master and perform in English.

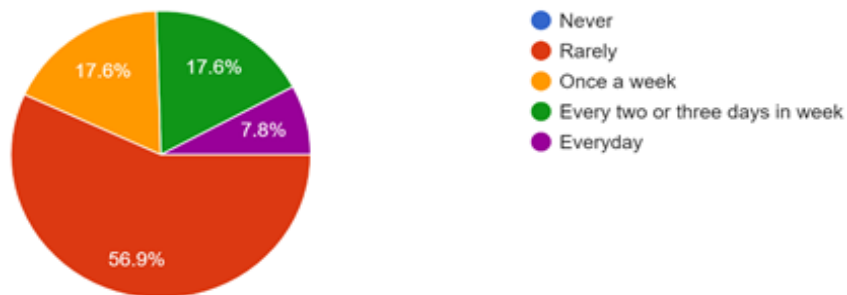


Figure 4: Frequency of using English with peers

Figure 4 highlights that 29 respondents (56.9%) rarely used English in conversation with their peers or friends. 9 respondents (17.6%) stated that the frequency of speaking English with peers was once a week and two to three days a week for both categories. Only 4 respondents (7.8%) stated that they spoke English regularly with their peers or friends.

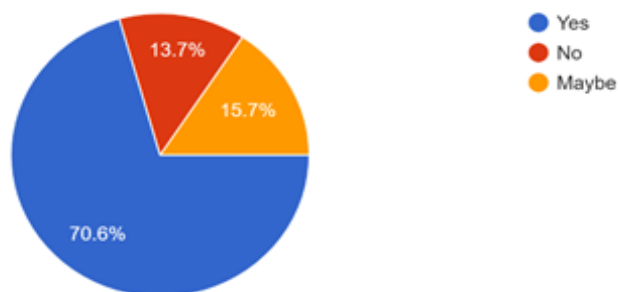


Figure 5: Difficulties in pronouncing certain words when speaking

Based on Figure 5, 36 respondents (70.6%) agreed that they had difficulty pronouncing certain words while speaking in English. On the other hand, 7 respondents (13.7%) did not find difficulty with pronunciation issues when speaking. There were 8 respondents (15.7%) who could not decide if they had difficulty in pronouncing certain words that could affect their communication skills in English.

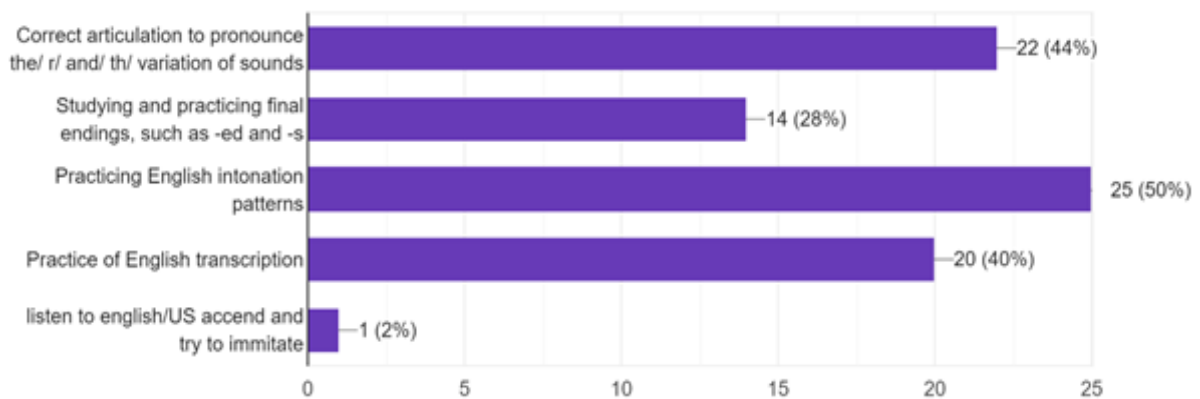


Figure 6: Techniques to enhance pronunciation

Based on Figure 6, the majority of the respondents chose that the most helpful technique in improving English pronunciation was by practising English intonation patterns. This is because there were 25 respondents (50%) who supported this technique. Other than that, there were 22 respondents (44%) who chose that the correct articulation to pronounce /r/ and /th/ sounds were very helpful. Next, the ‘Practice of English transcription’ technique was chosen by 20 respondents (40%). There were 14 respondents (28%) who felt that studying and practising final endings, such as -ed and -s would help to improve their pronunciation skills. Only one respondent (2%) selected listening to English or the United States accent could help in improving English pronunciation.

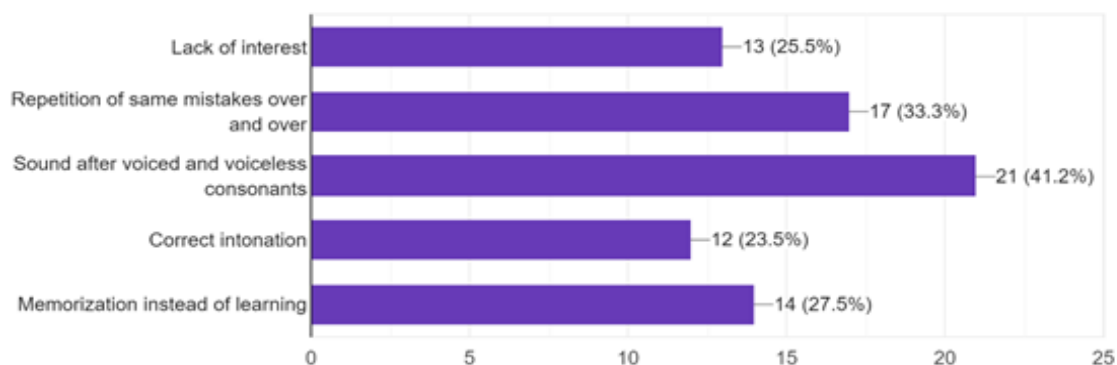


Figure 7: Challenges in learning correct English pronunciation

Figure 7 shows the analysis of challenges faced by the respondents in learning correct English pronunciation. 21 respondents (41.2%) thought that the ‘sound after voiced and voiceless consonants’ was the most difficult challenge in the attempt to learn the correct English pronunciation. The second challenge was the ‘repetition of the same mistake over and over’ where a total of 17 respondents (33.3%) chose this option. Next, the challenge of memorization instead of learning was supported by 14 respondents (27.5%). Besides that, the ‘lack of interest’ was supported by 13 respondents (25.5%) and ‘correct intonation’ was supported by 12 respondents (23.5%) with regards to the challenges they face in learning the correct pronunciation in English.

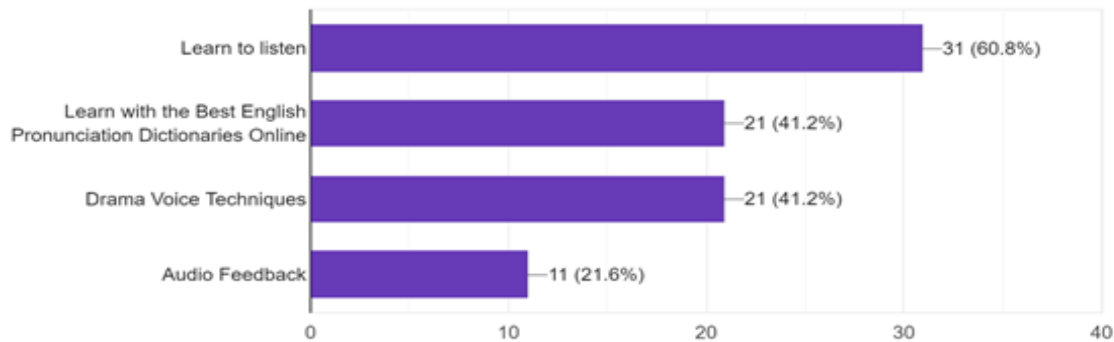


Figure 8: Technique to facilitate English pronunciation learning

Figure 8 shows that 31 respondents (60.8%) chose the technique of learning to listen to facilitate their learning of English pronunciation, which had the highest score. The second technique with the highest number of choices was to learn with the best English pronunciation dictionaries online and drama voice technique where both techniques received responses from 21 respondents (41.2%) respectively. Further, the audio feedback technique was the least popular among the respondents where only 11 respondents (21.6%) found it helpful.

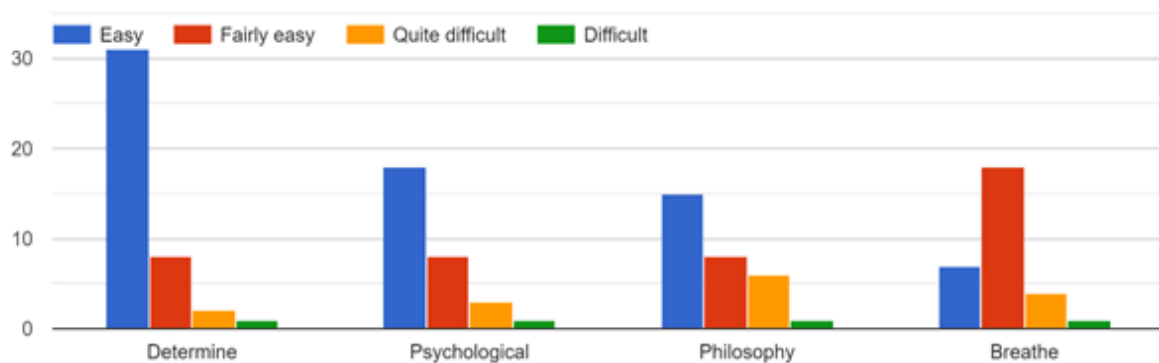


Figure 9: Difficult words to pronounce

Figure 9 exhibits the majority of respondents were of the opinion that the words ‘determine’, ‘psychological’ and ‘philosophy’ were easy for them to say compared to the word ‘breathe’. Besides that, there were also those who thought that these four words were quite easy to pronounce. In addition, there were some respondents who stated that the four words were difficult to pronounce and some of the respondents found them difficult to pronounce.

3.2 Part II - Practices on Pronunciation

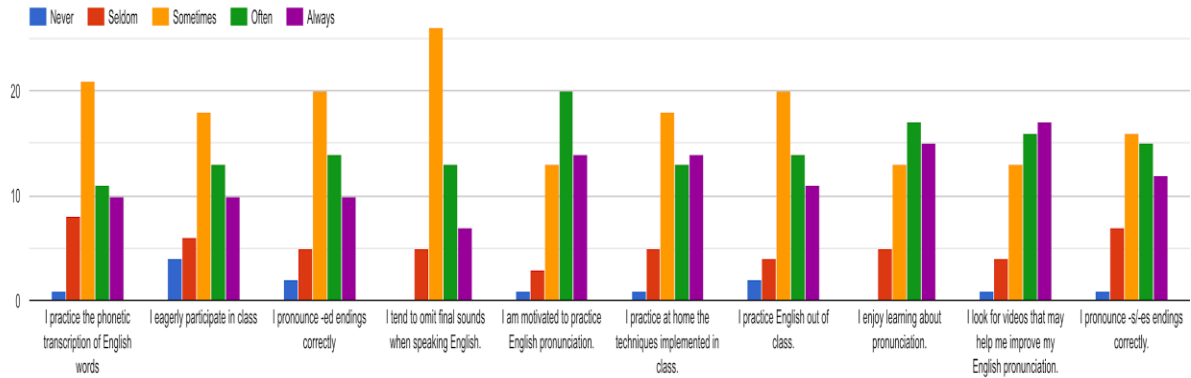


Figure 10: Practices of Pronunciation

There were ten items in part II (as highlighted in Figure 10). Based on the graph in figure 9, the data obtained showed that 10 respondents always practised the phonetic transcription of English words. Whereas 11 answered often, 21 answered sometimes and 8 respondents answered seldom. Only 1 respondent answered never practise the phonetic transcription of English words. Next, there were 10 respondents who always eagerly participated in class. 13 respondents answered often, 18 respondents answered sometimes, and 6 respondents answered seldom. 4 respondents never eagerly participate in class. Furthermore, there were 10 respondents who always pronounced -ed endings correctly. 14 respondents often, 20 respondents answered sometimes, 5 respondents seldom answered, and 2 respondents never pronounced -ed endings correctly.

There were 7 respondents who always tend to omit final sounds when speaking English. 13 respondents answered often, 26 respondents answered sometimes, and 5 respondents seldom tend to omit final sounds when speaking English. Besides, 14 respondents were always motivated to practise English pronunciation. 20 respondents answered often, 13 respondents answered sometimes, 3 respondents answered seldom, and only 1 respondent never motivated to practice English pronunciation. There was only 1 respondent who never practised at home the techniques implemented in class. 5 respondents answered seldom, 18 respondents answered sometimes, 13 respondents answered often, and 14 respondents always practised at home the techniques implemented in class. Next, 12 respondents always practiced English out of class, 14 respondents answered often, 20 respondents answered sometimes, 4 respondents answered seldom, and 2 respondents never practised English out of class.

There were 15 respondents who always enjoyed learning pronunciation. 17 respondents answered often, 13 respondents answered sometimes, and 5 respondents seldom enjoyed learning pronunciation. There were 17 respondents who always looked for videos that may help to improve English pronunciation. 16 respondents answered often, 13 respondents answered sometimes, 4 respondents answered seldom, and only 1 respondent never looked for videos that may help to improve English pronunciation. Lastly, there were 12 respondents who always pronounced -s/-es endings correctly. 15 respondents answered often, 16 respondents answered sometimes, 7 respondents answered seldom, and only 1 respondent never pronounced -s/-es endings correctly.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

As a general idea, it was found that 43.1% of the respondents felt that speaking was the most difficult skill to perform as compared to other skills and that 47.1% of the respondents said that English was not difficult but not easy either. Despite that, with the remaining respondents, there were more

respondents who felt that speaking English is difficult for them as compared to those who stated that it was easy. 70.6% of respondents had difficulties in pronouncing certain words.

There were four words given to the respondents which were 'determine', 'psychological', 'philosophy' and 'breathe'. Respondents had the most difficulty pronouncing the word 'breathe'. The second most difficult word to pronounce for the respondents is 'philosophy' and then, followed by 'psychological'. 'Determine' was the easiest for the respondents to pronounce. Respondents had the most challenges pronouncing the voiced and voiceless consonants while learning the correct English pronunciation. From this finding, it was deduced that most respondents were having difficulties pronouncing fricative words.

56.9% of the respondents rarely spoke English formally with their peers. This was probably due to their pronunciation because 78.4% of the respondents stated that they were reluctant to speak English due to poor pronunciation skills. However, there were discrepancies in this finding as 70.6% of respondents stated that their pronunciation was good and 60.7% respondents stated that their pronunciation made them speak without clarity. As for techniques used by respondents in facilitating their English pronunciation, 60.8% of the respondents stated that they would try to learn to listen. Learning with the best English pronunciation dictionaries and drama voice techniques received the same count at 41.2%. Meanwhile, getting audio feedback had the least votes, with 21.8% of respondents would use it to facilitate their learning of English pronunciation.

In terms of imitation, 90.1% of respondents tended to look for pronunciation videos to practice and 88.2% of the respondents enjoyed learning pronunciation and usually practiced their pronunciations outside of class. However, only 80.4% of the respondents were eager to participate in class to learn pronunciation and from this, it was concluded that respondents were more confident in learning by themselves at home rather than practicing in a group in class. As for the process of learning pronunciation, 92.2% of the respondents were motivated in practicing English pronunciation even though some of them (26%) did not entirely enjoy learning them. This finding is also supported by the study conducted by Diaab (2016) where sufficient practice is important to improve pronunciation and speaking skills.

An interesting finding in this study was that many of the respondents practiced transcribing English words. 19.6% of the respondents always did this and 21.6% of them often did the same. Another interesting finding was that many of the respondents tended to omit final sounds when speaking English. This most probably happened when the respondents were not confident with the voiced or voiceless consonants as 41.2% of the respondents had difficulties in pronouncing it correctly.

In conclusion, most respondents used imitation techniques in practicing their pronunciation such as learning to listen to pronunciation through online dictionaries and other's pronunciation. Even though most respondents felt reluctant to speak in English due to poor pronunciation, they were eager to learn and enjoyed learning pronunciation. However, many were more confident to learn outside the classroom. Omission of final sounds was evident in this study sample as most of the respondents had difficulties with the voiced and voiceless consonants. In this study, getting respondents for an online interview was a limitation as none of the respondents agreed to be interviewed or their answers to be recorded. For future studies, it is recommended to conduct interviews with these respondents and observing the changes of their pronunciation after they are introduced to correct pronunciation.

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