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Sentence stress and learning difficulties of ELT teachers: a Case Study

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Abstract

When learners are acquiring another language, they face a number of problems as every language is unique and it carries its particular aspects. Learning how to speak a new language is more than just learning words and sentences. It is also the perception and the practice of the emotional colouring of the utterances with correct sentence stress which is usually a problem among learners and also teachers. Using the right sentence stress is the key point in a proper communication. Although making mistakes on this area is very common, learners and teachers can still avoid themselves from some certain effects. Following these patterns a case study was conducted with 30 teachers of English aiming to spot the difficulties they face in using correct intonation and to illustrate the importance of correct intonation in the process of learning and teaching another language. The results of the study indicate that there is certain amount of sentence stress problems among teachers of English.

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1. Introduction

Stress is a very crucial constituent of intonation and it reveals with the L1 background of the speaker. In order to sound native like, stress in a sentence needs to be studied. Stress is something pertained to syllables and refers to the prominence produced with the help of muscular effort (Lehiste, 1970). Dale and Poms (2005) assert that detectable foreign accent is not something avoidable without mastering stress, rhythm, and intonation of a foreign language no matter how accurately one pronounces the individual sounds and has a good command of grammar. Additionally, Underhill (1994) believes that comprehension falls in difficulty without using the correct stress pattern. The word in a sentence which needs to be stressed mainly depends on the surrounding which leads the meaning as well as good commend of pronouncing the individual words. In the light of this information, the purpose of this study is to underline the sentence stress problems of the ELT teachers and draw attention to its reasons.

2. Sentence Stress and Its Functions

Sentence stress is accent on certain words within a sentence and it is the key component of English intonation. Intonation organizes words into sentences, distinguishes between different types of sentences, and adds an emotional colouring to utterances. English intonation is quite difficult for learners. Developing the ability to hear, understand and reproduce sentence stress in speech is the main requirement to master English intonation. When uttering a

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sentence, the content words such as nouns, verbs adjectives and question words are stressed as they carry the meaning. Function words such as articles and prepositions, on the other hand are not stressed. The basic rules for sentence stress are: 1. Content words are stressed 2. Structure words are unstressed 3. The time between stressed words is always the same.

As intonation organizes words into sentences, it would be beneficial to highlight the four functions of sentence stress. Tonic/Nuclear Stress refers to the syllable in a word which receives the most stress in an intonation unit. An intonation unit has one tonic stress; however, a sentence can have more than one intonation unit and therefore have more than one tonic stress. When emphasizing information, the speaker can change the stress from the principal noun to another content word such as an adjective or an intensifier and it is called the Emphatic Stress. Contrastive stress is used to point out the difference between one object and another. Contrastive stress tends to be used with determiners such as “this, that, these, and those”. The last type of stress is called “new information stress”. As the name suggests, the stress is on the new information in an utterance. When asked a question, the requested information is naturally stressed more strongly. In order to give the intended meaning, correctly used sentence stress is a must. As Kelly (2008) states, sentence stress has an essential role in expressing and understanding intended messages in long utterances and closely interrelated with intonation.

3. Learning Difficulties of Sentence Stress

Although intonation is one of the very common problems when learning a new language, the learners mostly focus on grammar. As Richards and Renandya (2002) indicates, students do not learn English; they learn grammar. When learners are uttering certain sentences or writing them, they are observed to make errors either because they have a low level of English or they have a high level of proficiency but don't have much contact with the target language. This is also true for the teachers who are in the classrooms to teach English as they are also taught by teachers who generally have a good level of proficiency but low level of speaking. This situation leads the English teachers to have difficulty in uttering the correct intonation even when they are practicing their profession. There are a number of reasons that cause the low proficiency level of the English teachers' intonation; some of them will be discussed below.

3.1. English Sentence stress /Mobility of Stress in English.

In English, the position of stressed syllables in the isolated words is generally fixed. However, when the case is sentence utterance, stress patterns are affected by component words' context. Typically, content words such as verbs and nouns are stressed whereas function words such as articles and prepositions are not. However, many other factors affect the sentence stress and several patterns are often possible which make intonation confusing for the learners of English. In English, stressed syllables are characterized not only by power level, but also by pitch level, duration and vowel quality (Sugito, 1996). However, pitch in natural conversation rises rapidly at the beginning of each phrase unit and falls gradually, giving a complex influence on the sentence stress. This situation brings out the need for learners of English to get related courses in order to overcome the possible problems.

3.2. English as a Stress-Timed Language

Languages can differ in terms of rhythm, and this is sometimes discussed in terms of syllable-timing and stress-timing (Abercrombie, 1967, p. 96-98). In the ideal syllable-timed language, each syllable would take up the same amount of time, or be isochronous, whereas in the ideal stress-timed language, it is the stress-foot which would be isochronous (the stress-foot consists of a stressed syllable plus any unstressed syllables which intervene before the next stress) (Nolan, 2008). According to this view Turkish and French are good examples of syllable-timing, and English is a good example of stress-timing. This means that stress in a spoken sentence occurs at regular intervals and the length it takes to say something depends on the number of stressed syllables rather than the number of

syllables itself. This situation leads the Turkish learners of English to have problems in uttering the correct intonation pattern.

3.3. *Rhythm and Stress and Critical Period Hypothesis*

Stress and rhythm together with intonation are often called prosody (Spencer, 1998). As Bauman-Waengler assert “the combined effect of intonation, stress, and tempo is referred to as the rhythm of a particular utterance or language” (Bauman-Waengler, 2009, p. 212). The rhythm and stress models of speech are acquired in childhood and hard for an adult to change. Acquiring the correct articulation is better done before the critical period. As the critical period hypothesis suggests, in order to have native like accent, the learning of the target language should start before the critical period. Neurolinguistically the rhythm as well as the other functions of the language can be acquired at younger ages when the child is in his maximum performance in terms of neurons. After the critical period, the learner will have difficulty perceiving which syllables are stressed and which are unstressed. Since stress is the main cue to word boundaries in spoken language, the learners will therefore have problems figuring out where words begin and end after they reach a certain age when learning becomes slower.

3.4. *Effect of “Output Filter”*

According to Krashen (1997), one other reason for problematic stress is considered as the “output filter”. Krashen (1997) believes that accent is acquired rapidly but is not performed because the learners do not feel like members of the group that uses it; “we are not members of the club” (Smith, 1988). Krashen further suggests that “Either we do not wish to be members or have not been invited to be members. And even after we feel we are at least partly in the group, we can feel suddenly excluded, resulting in a stronger output filter (p.3).”

3.5. *Limited Use of Technology and CALL in the Classroom*

Curing intonation and stress problems in the target language needs extra effort in the classroom in addition to the standard teaching methods. Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is a method which can be used in language classrooms. Although computers have been widely used for the purpose of visualization of intonation patterns since the 1970s, hardware and software in the form of speech digitizers, pitch trackers to produce displays of intonation curves and CALL software with audio and graphic components have become more accessible in the last decades (Sonsaat, 2010). Chun (1988, p. 14) proposes four areas that can be made use of for intonation teaching: ... (1) using computers to provide learners with visualization of their intonational patterns so that they can compare them to those of native speakers and thus improve their speech production; (2) using computer software or multimedia applications to provide learners with authentic speech and cultural input; (3) using software for automated testing purposes; (4) using computers for research purposes, i.e., to record students’ performance, progress, and steps toward self-correction.

4. STUDY

4.1. *Method of The Study*

The main aim of this particular study is to provide an overview of the sentence stress problems of the teachers of English. In order to do this, case study research design is used to look for the answer if the teachers of English have sentence stress problems.

A total number of 30 participants all of whom were English language teachers, participated in the research. 15 of the participants are teachers in a state high school and the other 15 participants are teachers at different universities in Turkey. One recording from a native speaker and one text- to- speech recording were other participants of the study. The teachers were asked to read total of 20 sentences (five simple, five complex, five compound and finally

five compound-complex). The voices of the teachers were recorded and the stress pattern of the recordings was studied on the “Audacity” program. The 2 recordings; one from a native speaker and one text-to-speech voice recordings were taken as the correct intonation. In order to find the stress problems, the recordings were studied in “Audacity” program as to see the wave movements of all recordings. The wavelengths of the “Audacity” recording and the native speaker recording were compared with the teachers’ recordings.

4.2. Findings

Findings of the study indicate that participants who have problem in acquiring the correct sentence stress pattern are more likely to have it in complex and compound-complex sentences. 14 of the participants have a problem in compound-complex sentences and 13 participants had difficulty in giving the expected stress pattern in complex sentences. The numbers go down to 2 in the articulation of simple and complex sentences. Among all the participants, 18 of them have a strong Turkish accent of English, 11 of them have American accent and 1 has British accent. 2 of the participants have native-like accent, 2 of them have near-native like accent, and 26 of them are accented. Findings show that 18 of the participants used the rhythm and stress in its minimum. As it was said earlier ‘intonation is the “music” of the language’, we can say that 18 of the participants did not “sing a song”. 16 of the participants used tonic empathic and contrastive stress in order to give the message which they think is more significant. However, the neutral stress was used for all sentences by 14 participants. 13 of the participants read the whole sentences in 1.50-1.70 minutes; only one participant was below that duration time with 1.46. 16 participants read between 2.08 to 2.18 minutes.

4.3. Discussion

The results of the study show that there is certain amount of sentence stress problem in teachers of English. As the data suggests, the sentence stress problem increases with the complex and complex-compound sentences where the participant has difficulty in deciding which information is more significant. The findings verify that when uttering the quote “You can put wings on a pig, but you don't make it an eagle” which was one of the sentences that was asked to be read by the participants, the stress was in its minimum in 14 of the participants as they have not encountered with that certain quote earlier. The obscurity of the message for the participants resulted in meaning loss in terms of sentence stress.

As the Turkish language is a syllable-timed language, the participants experienced the difficulty of giving stress to the function words and reducing the structure words. The findings of the study reveal that there was a high amount of problems in the reduction of individual words and syllables. This situation was seen minimum in 3 of the participants who have experienced living in the target culture. Although every participant read the same sentences, the duration of the reading time changed from 1.46 to 2.18. In order to be better learners of the target language, learners should never be led to compare English and their mother tongue. They should be explained that these two languages have different kinds of sounds and stress patterns.

Findings also reveal that teachers are in need of more technological tools to be used in their classrooms in order to improve their sentence stress problems. Teachers have limited opportunity to interact with the native culture which leads them to speak the target language in their native language accent and intonation. As CALL system is based on speech technology, it provides an interactive platform for the learners to evaluate their levels automatically and to give them advice on their pronunciation (Chaolei, Jia, & Shanhong, 2007). Technology in the classroom seems to be a potentially good source to improve intonation of the teachers as well as the students.

Results also indicate the evidence of the effect of “Output Filter” on the participants in terms of the environment where they have done the recordings. The recordings which were done in a common area led the participants have a clear loss of concentration in doing effective intonation. While the participants who were left alone to do the

recording in their environment were able to better focus on the intonation of the sentences, others experienced the loss of rhythm and stress in their pronunciation.

5. CONCLUSION

This particular study is substantial as it tries to shed a light on sentence stress as a problematic issue for the language teachers and the causes behind this problem. Every language is unique and carries its particular aspects. Therefore, the main concern of the learners of English should be learning the certain patterns of phonological stress in order to understand any language apart from their own because languages and the meaning they carry depend on stress, rhythm, and intonation.

It is an undeniable fact that learning sentence stress and rhythm is a long-termed study and cannot be done just by making plans to overcome the problem. Instead, listening to authentic texts, repeating the texts that were listened and practicing the problematic sounds and intonation patterns should become the most important part of the intensive study on pronunciation.

It would be impossible to understand any language without following a certain pattern of stress because languages depend on the stress, rhythm and intonation to be determined and distinguished between them, and, these should be the main concern of any person who aims to communicate in any language other than the native one.

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