

IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS THROUGH TEACHING ASSIMILATION AND ELISION

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Abstract:

This research, which is an experimental study, hypothesizes that teaching of fluency devices enhances speaking skills of the English language learners. To test this hypothesis an experimental group which consisted of 20 participants, was given treatment for six weeks by manipulating independent variable that is teaching of the fluency devices. The control group was given a usual training. Both of the groups were given pretest before the start of training and were post tested at the end of the treatment to find the result of the training given to experimental group. As the experimental group outperformed the control group, the hypothesis stands justified.

Key Words: Assimilation, Elision, Fluency, articulation, listening, comprehension

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In English there are a number of phenomena that are exploited by the native speakers to make their connected speech more fluent and rapid. These phenomena are assimilation, elision, weak forms, intrusive / r / and linking / r /. Besides, there are some lesser frequent phenomena like haplology and clipping. Economy of effort is the chief reason behind the use of fluency devices. All these factors are employed mainly for articulatory reasons. Under such treatment, words and phrases are made easier to execute either by altering the articulatory route or by shortening it. This sort of activity makes muscular activity less rigorous. The main focus of this research paper will be on assimilation in connected speech.

Assimilation is one of the most frequently used fluency devices in English. Assimilation and other fluency enhancing factors make the execution easier since articulatorily hard sounds are either modified or merged together. It demands lesser effort to pronounce assimilated words/phrases since the movement of the articulators is made less rigorous.

1.1 **Objectives**

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To highlight the importance of assimilation in listening skills.
2. To enhance the listening skills of English language learners.

1.2 **Statement of Problem**

Listening skills of learners of English as a foreign language are weak due to two main reasons: their ears are not attuned to English language and they lack knowledge of assimilation as is exercised in native speech. As a result, they have intelligibility problem when they are listening to native or native like speech. However, assimilation can be taught to language learners to improve their listening.

1.3 **Hypothesis**

A proper knowledge of the use of assimilation can enhance the listening skills of English language learners.

1.4 Delimitations

The present study is delimited to teaching of assimilation, one of fluency enhancing factors, to improve listening skills of the learners. This research is conducted in the Department of English for Functional courses at National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. A group of 20 students from Diploma class was selected for experimentation whereas another group of 20 students from same level was taken as control group.

Literature Review

Listening skills play an important role in effective communication. That is why it is not neglected area of language learning in nonnative areas of the language. However, Chaturvedi & Chaturvedi (2011: 90) suggest that in order to improve “our listening skills, we must know the characteristics of effective as well as ineffective listeners and identify our own weaknesses as listeners”. These weaknesses can become cause of “Language Barrier”. That is why De Houwer & Wilton, (2011:143) opine that the teachers of English in nonnative areas are expected “to help their learners cope with “real English”, which taken to be the English used by native speakers in their speech communities”. The analysis of a “real English” shows that the native speakers use fluency devices such as assimilation and elision for “economy of effort” which can cause intelligibility problem for nonnative listeners (Kelly, 2006: 108). Roach (2009: 110) defines assimilation as “in natural connected speech sounds belonging to one word can cause changes in sounds belonging to neighboring words”. A digression is desirable to explain certain type and rule of assimilation.

2.1. Regressive/Anticipatory Assimilation

The phenomenon in which a phonetic feature spreads from a segment to a proceeding segment, as when English /t/ or /s/ is pronounced with lip rounding when medially followed by /u:/ or /w/ and in soon and twice.

2.2. Progressive / Preservative Assimilation

In this type, a sound is affected by its preceding sound, e.g. 'lunch score' will change into 'lunch shcore'. In progressive assimilation, a sound changes because of the influence of the preceding sound, as when / s / becomes / f / following / dz / in such phrases as Goadge street.

2.3. Reciprocal or coalescent assimilation

In this type two sounds exercise influence upon each other, e.g. / wɒdʒv / will change into / wɒdʒv / . It is a phonological change in which a sequence of two segments is converted to a single segment. Apart from the above mentioned types of assimilation, there is another type which deals with the past forms of regular English verbs and the plural forms of regular English nouns. It is called voice assimilation.

2.4. Voice Assimilation

Since English is not a phonetic language, it tends to deceive its learners most of the time. Its consonant sounds play a most significant role in the pronunciation of its regular verbs and nouns (their past and plural forms respectively).

As regards the formation of the past forms of the regular English verbs as well as the present simple in third person singular, there are certain rules. Before discussing these rules, it would be very useful to understand the phenomenon of voicing. Voicing takes place due to the vibration of the vocal lips situated inside the larynx. Crystal writes: Sounds produced while the vocal cords are vibrating are voiced sounds, e.g. [b, z, a, i]; those produced with no such vibration are voiceless or unvoiced e.g. [p, s, h].

So, the following voiceless sounds in English play very important role in production of the past form of regular English verbs and regular plural forms of English nouns. They are / p /, / k /, / tʃ /, / f /, / θ /, / s /, / t / . Now, it would be easier to understand the phenomenon of voice assimilation.

Rules

- i) If the base form of a verb ends with any of the voiceless sounds, its orthographic 'ed' form will change into / t / sound, e.g.

Base Form	Past Form	Phonetic Form
Stop	Stopped	/ s t ɒ p t /
Talk	Talked	/ t ɔ: k t /
Rush	Rushed	/ r ʌ ʃ t /
Preach	Preached	/ p r i: t ʃ t /
Check	Checked	/ t ʃ e k t /

Ex.1 Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed. 1995

- ii) On the other hand, if a base form of a regular verb ends with a voiced sound, its orthographic 'ed' form will be pronounced as / d /, e.g.

Base Form	Past Form	Phonetic Form
Name	Named	/ n e I m d /
Call	Called	/ k ɔ: l d /
Play	Played	/ p l e I d /
Follow	Followed	/ f ɒ l ə v d /
Revise	Revised	/ r I v a I z d /

Ex.2 Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed. 1995

iii) If a verb ends with / t / or / d /, it takes / Id / as its phonetic form, e.g.

Base Form	Past Form	Phonetic Form
Shout	Shouted	/ ʃ a v t I d /
Command	Commanded	/ k ə m a: n d I d /
Print	Printed	/ p r I n t I d /
Recommend	Recommended	/ r e k ə m e n d I d /
Kid	Kidded	/ k I d I d /

Ex.3 Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed. 1995

Likewise, there are certain rules that determine the pronunciation of the plural forms of regular English nouns. Voiceless sounds as well as 6 sibilant sounds / s /, / z /, / ʃ /, / ʒ /, / tʃ /, / dʒ / in English play an important role in the plural formation of regular nouns. The sibilant sounds are produced by a narrow, groove like structure and some of them are produced by hissing sounds.

Rules

i) If a regular noun or a verb (in the third person singular) ends with any of the voiceless sounds, the plural morpheme, i.e. 's' will be pronounced as / s /, See examples below:

Ex.4

Singular Form	Plural / Third Person Singular Form	Phonetic Form
Cat	Cats	/ k æ t s /
Talk	Talks	/ t ɔ: k s /
Stop	Stops	/ s t ɒ p s /
Walk	Walks	/ w ɔ: k s /
Desk	Desks	/ d e s k s /

Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed. 1995

- ii) If a noun or a verb ends with any of the voiced sounds, the plural morpheme, i.e. 's' will take / z / as its phonetic form, as in the examples below:

Singular Form	Plural/Third Person Singular Form	Phonetic Form
Behave	Behaves	/ b I h e I v z /
Bag	Bags	/ b æ g z /
Betray	Betrays	/ b I t r e I z /
Play	Plays	/ p l e I z /
Plan	Plans	/ p l æ n z /

Ex.5 Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed. 1995.

- iii) If a noun or a verb ends with any of the sibilant sounds, its plural morpheme will be pronounced as / I z /, e.g.

Singular Form	Plural / Third Person Singular Form	Phonetic Form
Encourage	Encourages	/ I n k ʌ r I d ʒ I z /
Bench	Benches	/ b e n t ʃ I z /
Bush	Bushes	/ b ʊ ʃ I z /
Message	Messages	/ m e s I d ʒ I z /
Buzz	Buzzes	/ b ʌ z I z /

Ex.6 Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed. 1995

Like assimilation, elision is also commonly used as fluency devices by native speakers of English. According to Roach (2009: 113) elision means "under certain circumstances sounds disappear". However these sounds disappear under certain systematic rules. Once again a digression is desirable to explain the rules of elision.

2.5 Elision

English makes frequent use of elision. In this process, a word is made more pronounceable by dropping a sound from it. The word elision has been derived from Latin 'elisio', 'a striking out'. Elision means any of various processes in which phonological material is lost from a word or phrase. In the process of eliding, both consonants and vowels can be affected, e.g. camera, /kæmrə/, recognize /rekənaɪz/.

Elision is a commonly used fluency device in English. Native speakers exploit it in order to drop any sound they find difficult to articulate. By dropping such a sound, the rest of the word, that is still semantically capable of carrying the complete meaning, becomes very economical to articulate. For example, the words 'friends', 'windmill' and 'handsome' are still semantically valid even after the /d/ sound from each is dropped.

In short, as Kelly (2006: 121) suggests, the learners should pay attention to these "aspects of connected speech", and the teacher should explain how these aspects "can be studied and practiced in class."

Research Methodology

The current study is an experimental research in which quantitative research design is used to test hypothesis. This experiment tested the hypothesis using two groups which were control and experimental groups. These groups which served as samples were selected on the basis of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. Researchers selected 40 male students of English Diploma studying at National University of Modern Languages (NUML). They were divided into two groups. There were 20 students in each group.

Both groups were tested using pre-test before the conduction of the experiment and both were found identical in their performance in listening skills. The control group was taught listening skills through different traditional ways. On the other hand, the experimental group was taught rules of assimilation and elision with listening skills. They were treated for 6 weeks. Then they were given a post-test to know the differences that treatment had caused. Finally, the results were drawn on the basis of their performance.

Data Analysis

This part presents the analysis of pre-tests and post tests of both of the groups to justify the hypothesis which states that teaching of assimilation and elision can improve listening skills of the learners. The part one of the analysis presents comparison of pretest whereas part two presents the comparison of post tests.

4.1 Part one: Comparison between the Pre-test of Control Group and Pre-test of Experimental Group

For the comparison between results pre-tests of both of the groups T-Test is applied and for that the following null hypothesis is established.

Ho, $\mu_1 = \mu_2$ (both of the groups are same)

H1, $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ (both of the groups are not same)

Mean(Control Group)	18.75
S.D (Control Group)	5.003945811
Mean(Experimental group)	19.3
S.D(Experimental group)	4.768334613
T-value	-0.222

As the t-value -0.22, given in row five column two of the table given above, does not fall in the critical region which is either more than 0.5 or less than -0.5, we cannot reject our null hypothesis (Ho, $\mu_1 = \mu_2$). In other words the result of the pre-test of control and the pre-test of experimental group shows that both of the groups are same. If manipulation of independent group during the treatment phase of experimental group makes the difference in post test, the researcher's hypothesis is justified.

4.2 Part Two: Comparison between Post-tests of Control and Experimental Groups

This comparison between the post-tests of control and experimental group is required to justify our hypothesis. As the experimental group was given proper treatment for six weeks and the control group was not exposed to any special treatment, so this comparison will now clearly show the effectiveness of the treatment given to the experimental group. Before the analysis of the table the following null hypothesis is established.

$H_0, \mu_1 = \mu_2$ (there is no significant difference between the results of post-test of control group and post- test of experimental group)

$H_1, \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ (there is a significant difference between the results of the post-test of control group and post- test of experimental group)

Mean(Control Group)	25.85
S.D (Control Group)	3.01
Mean(Experimental group)	32.75
S.D(Experimental group)	3.196
T-value	-5.85

The t-value, that is, -5.85, as given in row five column two of the table given above, falls in the critical region which is either more than 0.5 or less than -0.5 so as a result, we can reject our null hypothesis and accept alternative hypothesis .In other words, the result of control group and experimental group in the post test is not same. Moreover, this difference in the performance justifies the researcher's hypothesis as well. If the mean of both of the groups is taken into consideration, it is found that experimental group has shown better performance in the post test. Mean of control group is 25.85 and experimental group is 32.75.As before the treatment both the groups were the same, it is concluded that the improvement is brought about by the treatment given through independent variable. Moreover, this improvement justifies our hypothesis as well.

Conclusion

After the treatment phase, both experimental and control groups were post tested to justify the hypothesis. The researchers' findings are given below:

5.1 Findings:

After a detailed analysis of the result the researchers have the following findings.

1. Teaching of assimilation and elision improves listening comprehension of English language learners.
2. The participants of experimental group were more confident after the treatment phase as they were sure that they would not be having intelligibility problem if they are made to listen a native speech.
3. During the treatment phase the participants of experimental group were found more motivated and participative.

5.2 Suggestions and Recommendations:

In present study the researchers practiced two of the fluency devices: assimilation and elision which proved to be fruitful as they could enhance listening skills of the participants. Further study is suggested on fluency devices such as linking and intrusive /r/ to enhance listening comprehension of the learners. The listening skills teachers are suggested to teach the learners the fluency devices to enhance the listening comprehension of the learners.

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