

OBSERVATIONS ON PHONETIC INTERFERENCE IN THAI LEARNERS OF RUSSIAN

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ABSTRACT

Thai learners of Russian language produced sounds of their mother tongue as well as sounds from a previously learned language, English, along with normative Russian consonants. The negative results of interference are caused by the specific structure of the Thai language and absence of the equivalents of Russian consonants. The results permit me to conclude that the character of interference depends on, firstly, the type of stimuli (audio or visual), secondly the position of the consonants in the syllable and thirdly the type of consonant according to the active articulator.

Keywords: Thai, Russian, consonants, phonetic interference

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents observations on how Thai learners of Russian produce Russian consonants. This study of Thai-Russian interference during the second language acquisition is the first of its kind and so far still the only one carried out. The experiment was conducted for PhD research in St. Petersburg, Russia, thus Russian phonetic classification and terms are used here: for instance, instead of IPA place of articulation active articulator is used; palatalization is also a key feature here since it is relevant in Russian (see for example [4, 5]), palatalized consonants are marked with an apostrophe.

Phonemes are systematically opposed to each other according to their features. Realization of wrong features leads to realization of wrong phonemes and words, thus the errors produced by the students are grouped by those features.

Specifications of the Thai sound system and syllable structure, such as limitation in consonants at the end of the word/syllable, can cause a strong interference in word/syllable formation in second language acquisition. Not only standard Thai can influence the students' pronunciation, also the local dialect of certain individuals may result in phonetic interference. Furthermore, the influence

of previously learned languages can also be observed in the acquisition of a new one (see [1, 2, 3]).

However, during the early stage of second language acquisition interference may appear due to both the sound systems of the two languages and the writing systems; thus the informants were presented with both audio and written materials.

2. METHODS

2.1. Subject

Five Thai female students, Russian language learners at the beginner level, agreed to be tested. At the time of the experiment they were studying in their first year at the University Thammasat, Bangkok, Thailand. All of them had studied English in school. One of them also knows a northern dialect and Chinese.

2.2. Stimuli and procedure

200 Russian words and pseudowords were presented in random order. Among them 163 were monosyllabic words, 21 were bi-syllabic, 2 were tri-syllabic and 14 artificial syllables. Vowels and consonants were arranged in CV and CVC positions. For the imitation part of the test the informants were presented with Russian words to listen to and repeat. During the reading part, a word list was presented to them. They were then recorded with a digital recorder. The retrieved data was later analyzed auditorily and acoustically. It was also presented to 2 Russian native speakers, phonetics teachers, who gave verbal feedback.

The oral repetition was chosen in order not only to study the students' pronunciation and their ability to produce speech but also to observe their ability to distinguish Russian phonemes. Without a doubt the given task does not pinpoint directly how the students 'hear' the Russian phonemes. However, it gives a hint on what could be problematic areas in their auditory ability and ability to differentiate Russian phonemes. A writing task was also to be carried out for this

purpose, although unfortunately most informants refused to complete it. The reading task, on the other hand, introduces another problematic area, the relation of letters to sounds. Words in their written forms should also be learned/recognized together with their correct pronunciation. The reading task helps to identify the possible problems when the students read aloud or reproduce words learned from text reading.

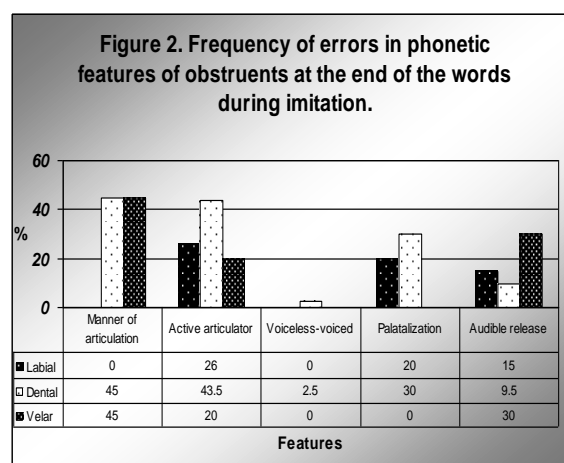
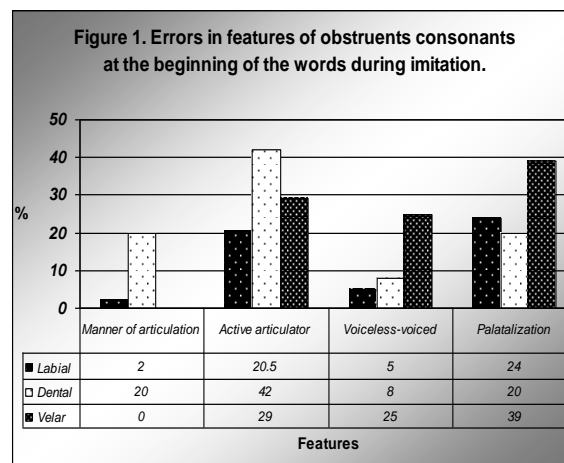
The words chosen for the tasks were to represent all Russian phonemes in both word-initial and word-final positions. Most of the words were unknown to the students as it would be impossible to retrieve all the necessary phonemes from the limited vocabulary known by beginners. In addition to this, the tasks were not intended to study how well the students mastered the words they had already encountered but rather to cover the widest possible problematic areas. The results should enable teachers to plan more efficient ways to teach pronunciation accordingly.

3. RESULTS

During imitation Russian consonants are mainly represented by Thai consonants and only occasionally by sounds the learners have acquired from when they learned English, for example the voiced fricatives /z/, /v/. The most influential factor is the phonetic position (beginning or end of the word). Hissing consonants and all soft (palatalized) consonants are the most problematic to produce. The word end position appears to be especially problematic because all stops will be pronounced without audible release and fricatives may be replaced with stops, following Thai syllable structure. Many of the observed errors also concern the active articulator, although the frequency of wrong realizations varies, depending on the group of consonants (see figures 1, 2). For labial consonants at the beginning of the word up to 24% of errors in palatalization were found, followed by 20.5% in active articulator and even less in voiceless-voiced distinction and manner of articulation. On the contrary, at the end of the word most often (26%) mistakes were made in the active articulator, a little less in palatalization (20%) and audible release (15%).

In the place of dental consonants, both at the beginning and the end of the word, errors mostly concerned the active articulator (42% and 43% accordingly), then manner of articulation and palatalization. Mistakes in voiceless-voiced

distinction and audible release are relatively low (2.5% - 9.5%).



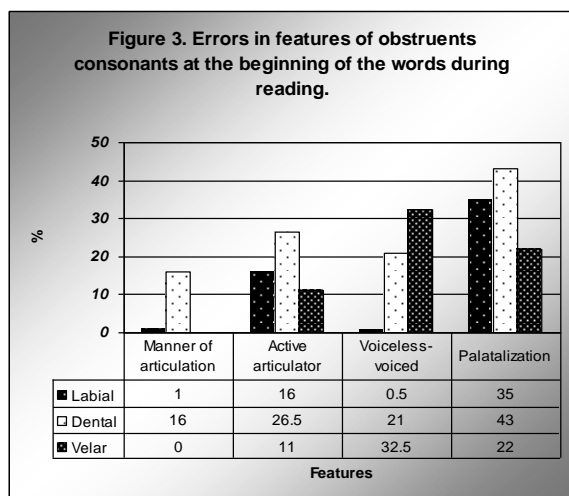
For velar consonants, at the beginning of the word, errors were frequently found in palatalization (39%), voiceless-voiced distinction (25%) and in the active articulator (29%), whereas at the end of the word the Thai informants made more mistakes in manner of articulation (45%). In this position stop consonants were pronounced without the necessary audible release and fricative was replaced by stop consonant.

In sonorants, palatalized consonants were produced with errors both at the beginning of the word and at the end. However, at the end of the word errors were also made concerning manner of articulation, active articulator, and even worse errors with palatalization, especially in nasals (see figures 5, 6).

The results of the reading task also show the importance of the position of the consonants in the syllable (word) for Thai speakers. As a rule, the majority of Russian letters were reproduced in speech with Thai equivalents. During this task

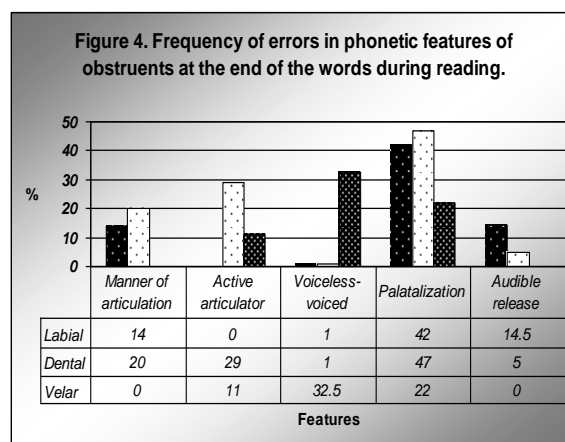
there were mistakes due to phonetic-graphemic interference. For example, the Russian grapheme “P” /r/ was interpreted as the labial /p/ consonant, the letter “r” as an /r/ trill. However, the so-called “exotic” letters did not hinder the formation of sound-letter relations for Thai students. In such cases, those letters were realized with the corresponding Thai consonants, which did not lead to misunderstanding of the word. Russian letters corresponding to palatalized consonants were produced as weakly palatalized or non-palatalized consonants of Thai. Weakly palatalized consonants were observed before letters corresponding to [i] and [e] sounds. At the beginning of the word, letters corresponding to different groups of consonants were realized differently. In addition to this, characteristics of the realization of consonants were influenced by the grapheme of the word.

At the beginning of the word, errors concerning manner of articulation characterized dental obstruents. Errors in active organ were observed in labial, dental and velar consonants. Errors in voiceless-voiced features concerned only dental and velar consonants. Most often errors in palatalization were made especially when producing dental consonants (43%) (see figure 3).

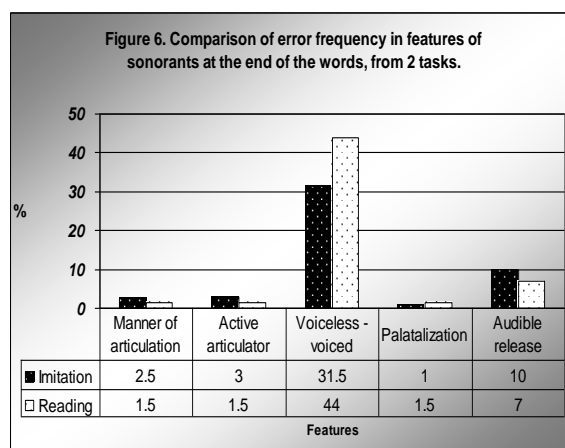
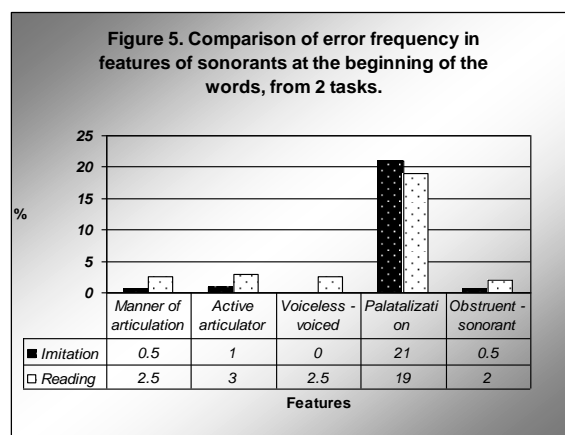


Similar mistakes were found at the end of the words, with a slight difference: mistakes in manner of articulation were found when producing not only dental consonants (20%) but also labial ones (14%). Mistakes in the active articulator concerned dental (29%) and velar consonants but not labials. Mistakes with voiceless-voiced consonants stood out in velar consonants (32.5%). Similar to the position at the beginning of the word, mistakes in palatalization were made in all groups of consonants, especially in labials (42%) and dentals (47%). At

the end of the word plosive dental and velar consonants were replaced by Thai equivalents, but without audible release (see figure 4).



During sonorant realization errors in palatalization were observed the most: 40% -85% in the beginning of the word and 93%-100% at the end of the word. This characterized, to a high extent, /l'/ /r'/ at the beginning of the word and /m'/, /n'/, /l'/, /r'/ at the end of the word. Mistakes in other areas were made much less (see figure 5, 6).



4. DISCUSSION

The results of the experiment shows that for both imitation and reading tasks Thai students formed the syllable according to the syllable structure in Thai which resulted in a limited number of stops used at the end of the word/syllable, most of them being pronounced without audible release just as in Thai words/syllables. Absence of the equivalent of Russian consonants, especially palatalized consonants, appears to be the most problematic area for Thai learners. In such places the informants produced sounds from their mother tongue, weakly palatalized or non-palatalized. The rest of the occurrences of interference involve the active articulator, manner of articulation and voicing in certain consonants.

In the reading task phonemic-graphemic interference was observed. Certain Cyrillic letters were mistaken for Latin letters although Latin letters are not used in Thai writing since Thai has its own writing system.

This is only the first attempt to investigate the question of Thai-Russian phonetic interference. There is still much to be researched in order to present the whole picture of this kind of interference, including further, more detailed studies of Thai phonetics. This study was designed to cover the widest range of potentially problematic areas in pronunciation in order to prepare teachers for what they can expect to encounter when teaching or communicating with students in Russian. The results obtained in this study can help teachers understand miscommunication due to wrong phoneme or word realizations by the students. Lesson planning can also benefit from this kind of study, as it gives clues to what the teachers should emphasize and spend more time on when training the students.

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