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A Contrastive Analysis of English and French Consonant Systems and Implications for Language Learning

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Abstract

A contrastive study of the systems of the second language and the mother tongue of language learners is one of the most effective ways of language teaching and learning. Apart from other factors, including psychological and pedagogical factors, mother-tongue interference seems to be the major problem facing language learners. In this analysis, that focused French and English consonant sound systems, contrasts were made in the consonant sounds and areas of differences in the two systems identified. This explains why French speakers who learn English language and vice versa often have pronunciation difficulties because of some differences in the sounds and even in areas of articulation of the sounds. Where some sounds in one language do not exist in the other, it becomes even more tasking to learn the language. This paper, therefore, made an analysis of the consonant sounds of both English and French languages and recommended that learning results are best when a contrastive presentation of both a target language and the mother tongue of the learner is presented to the learner. This will enable such a learner to know the correct target form and work toward achieving it, at least, to an intelligible level.

Keywords: Sound contrasts, French consonant system, English consonant system, Consonant sounds, Implications

Introduction

The ultimate aim in learning a second language must generally be to achieve the same flexibility, the same linguistic creativity and efficiency that the native speaker possesses. This is not, however, to say that we can expect to achieve the same degree of language proficiency but that learners could construct new utterances in the target language with ease.

If we keep a record of the most common mistakes language learners make, we will find that many of the mistakes occur as a result of mother-tongue interference, or literal translation. In other words, learners often apply the

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grammar rules of their own languages to the English Language. The same is true for mistakes in pronunciation. Correct pronunciation is one of the fundamental components in a foreign language acquisition. Generally, the sound system of any language causes difficulty to any second language learner especially where there are variations or where some sounds in the first language do not exist in the second language or when it is the other way round.

This contrastive analysis is an attempt to describe the peculiarities and differences of the consonant inventories of English and French for which English language teachers require a special effort from language learners. This study has become necessary because according to Ferguson (1965), "a careful contrastive analysis of the two languages offers an excellent basis for the preparation of instructional materials, the planning of courses, and the development of actual classroom techniques". Similarly, Politzer&Stuaback (1961) stated that "By comparing the linguistic analysis of the native language of the learner... with that of the language to be studied ...,we highlight the major difficulties encountered by the learner. Similarly, Kapandze and Kuparadze (2016) noted that contrastive analysis reveals what is language specific, which is important both for the understanding of languages in general and for the study of the particular language. This comparison enables us to construct teaching and testing materials quite systematically and to give due emphasis to the points of real difficulty". It is believed that the most effective teaching techniques are based on a pragmatic description of the language to be learned carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.

However, this paper focuses on the contracts in the English and French consonant systems. English speakers, who learn French language or vice versa are likely to encounter problems with some pronunciations in the target language because of variations of sounds or absence of others. These problems will be presented here and an attempt will be made to proffer suggestions to the solution of the problems.

The Consonant Sound

We may refresh our minds on the understanding of the concept of consonants. Consonant sounds according to Chike-Okoli, (2000) are phonetic sounds produced in the sound system when there is a total blockage of the air passage so that no air can escape at all or when there is a partial blockage of the passage so that air can escape but with a frictional noise. This air blockage can

occur at different speech organs like the lips, the teeth, the soft palatable, the uvula, and so on. The type of sound produced depends entirely on the place where the air blockage has occurred. Sounds produced with a total blockage of the air passage are called *plosive* sounds. When the blockage of air is released, there is explosion as air bursts forth and such plosive sounds, /p,t, k/ and /b,d,g/ are produced. On the other hand, *fricative* sounds are produced when there is a partial closure of the air passage. The whistling air produces such sounds as /f,θ, s, ʃ, h/ and /v, ð, z, l, r, ʒ, j, w/ as air struggles out through the partially blocked air route. There are also others that are *nasalized* when air that is blocked at the mouth route escapes through the nose. There are three nasal consonant sounds, /m, n and ŋ/.

A Table of Consonant Sounds of English and French

Mode of Formation	English		French		Place of Articulation
	Voiceless	Voiced	Voiceless	Voiced	
Plosive	P	B	P	b	Bilabial
	t	d	t	d	alveolar
	k	g	k	g	velar
	F	V	F	V	Labiodentals
	θ	ð			dental
Fricative	S	Z	S	Z	Alveolar
		l		*l	alveolar
		r			alveolar
				*r	vela
	ʃ	ʒ	ʃ	ʒ	Palatoalveolar
		w			labial
		j		J	palatal

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H				glottal
Nasals	M	M		Bilabial
	n	n	ɲ	alveolar
	ŋ			velar

English Consonant Sounds

English consonants, 24 in number, fall into two basic divisions, namely, the voiced and voiceless consonants. Among the plosives, /p/, /t/, /k/ are voiceless while /b/, /d/, /g/ are voiced. /p/, /b/ are labial sounds in which production there is total air blockage. /t/, and /d/ are alveolar sounds formed at the teeth ridge. Velar plosives /k/, /g/ are produced at the soft palate when the back of the tongue presses against it. When the obstructed air is finally released, various sounds are produced at various points of obstruction or blockage.

In pronouncing /p/ and /b/ correctly in Standard English, there is a great difference between them. There is much stronger puff of air in 'pea' than in 'bee', for instance, English /p/ is called aspirated consonant produced as if it were followed by a slight /h/ sound. Thus, in producing /pi:/, it would sound /p^hi:/. This aspiration is most marked before a stressed vowel as in 'pay' /pei/ and 'part' /pa:t/. English /p/ is almost always spelt 'p' as in 'pat', 'pit', 'pay', 'pot'. English /b/ as in 'bee' and 'boat' is not aspirated. It is not fully voiced at the beginning of a word as in 'bit', 'bet', 'bat', 'back', but it is silent before 't' as in 'debt', 'doubt', 'subtle'.

Words containing /t/ or /d/ are 'tie' and 'day'. The tongue is pressed against the teethridge to form a complete closure. When the tongue is released, air rushes out. The rush of air is less strong in /d/ than in /t/. The consonant /d/, a voiced plosive, corresponds to /t/, its voiceless equivalent just as /b/ corresponds to /p/.

/g/ is related to /k/ as /d/ is to /t/ and /b/ is to /p/. An English /k/ before a stressed vowel is aspirated as in 'key' /ki:/ and 'cholera' /kəlerə/. Between the release of /k/ and the beginning of the vowel, there is a puff of air like a slight /h/. So, 'key' /ki:/ will now sound /k^hi:/. An English /g/ at the beginning or end of a word as in 'give' or 'bag' is not fully voiced. On the other hand, the sound /k/ may be spelt in various ways as in 'cat', 'kit', 'back', 'chemist', 'antique', where it is variously represented by other letters. A written /k/ is silent in words like 'knee', 'knight', 'know'.

The labiodental fricatives /f/, /v/, are produced when the lower lip is placed lightly against the upper teeth. There is a hissing noise to produce /f/ and a buzzing noise in the case of /v/ as in

/f/	/v/
leaf	leave
safe	save
serf	serve
fail	veil

According to Ladefoged (2006), words of Greek origin with 'ph' are sounded /f/ as in 'phrase', 'Philip', and 'gh' in 'rough', 'cough', 'laughter', 'draught' also sound /f/.

The dental fricative sounds produced in 'thin' /θin/ and 'then' /ðen/ are /θ/ and /ð/. /θ/ is voiceless while /ð/ is voiced and they are produced by placing the tip of the tongue behind the upper teeth and breathing out. As blocked air is forced out and the tip of the tongue slightly drawn back, /θ/ and /ð/ sounds are produced. Both of these sounds are regularly spelt 'th', thus, making it difficult to determine which is meant. However, they can be differentiated by voicing of /ð/ sound as against the voiceless /θ/ sound. They occur in words like

/θ/	/ð/
thin	then
three	they
threw	there
tooth	booth

The alveolar fricatives /s/ and /z/ are often produced with relative ease in English. The vocal cords vibrate while sounding /z/ but not for /s/. This means that /z/ is voiced unlike /s/. The sound /s/ is spelt 's' as in 'seal', 'safe', 'sink' but there are several other spellings as in 'cease', 'dense', 'pass', 'waltz', 'scent', 'sent' where the /s/ sound is produced. /z/ is written as in 'zeal', 'seize', 'zone' and 'zinc' but sound/s/in words with 's' or 'ss' as in 'plays', 'possess', 'lease', 'appease'.

The palate-alveolar fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are produced almost the same way as /s/ and /z/. /ʃ/ is voiceless but /ʒ/ is voiced. At the beginning or end of a word as in 'show' and 'wash', /ʃ/ is usually written 'sh'. When preceded by a vowel, /ʃ/ is sounded /ʒ/ as in 'evasion', 'erosion', 'confusion'. The /ʒ/ sound never occurs at the beginning of a word in English. It is seen in middle positions as in 'vision', 'measure', 'usual' and 'prestige'.

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The non-conventional combination /tʃ/ is often written 'ch' in words they occur. Sometimes, it is written 'tch' as in: 'chin', 'chest', 'cheat', 'sachet', 'match', 'watch', catch, itch.

The combination /dʒ/ is spelt 'j' or 'g' at the beginning of words where they occur as in 'joy', 'jeer', 'gin', 'gem'. In the middle or end position, it is spelt 'dge' as in 'edge', 'bridge', knowledge. Other words like 'age', 'rage', 'barge' also have /dʒ/ sounds written as 'g'.

There are three nasal consonant sounds in English, namely, /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/. They are all voiced as the soft palate lowers, allowing air passage through the nose. The /m/ sound is produced when the two lips form a complete blockage of the air stream and the soft palate is lowered to allow air to pass through the nose. When this happens, sounds like **mail**, **mark**, **mother**, **method**, **men**, **mock**, are produced. Similarly, when the tip of the tongue presses against the teeth ridge, forming a complete closure of the air passage, the soft palate is lowered to allow air to escape through the nose to produce /n/ sounds as in **nose**, **nice**, **nail**, **net**, and **nude**. English language has no other character to represent /ŋ/. It is often spelt 'ng' with minor variations as in 'zinc', 'sink', 'hang', 'bank', where only letter 'n' is written. Words containing /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/ include

/m/	/n/	/ŋ/
seem	ten	long
dim	one	ring
mountain	ant	bang
man	kin	young
measure	Ann	monger

The alveolar fricatives /l/ and /r/ are produced by the tip of the tongue. When it is placed against the teeth ridge and air forced out on release of tongue blockage, /l/ is produced as in 'love', 'lame', 'line'. 'fail', 'hell'. When the tip of the tongue presses against the hard palate and air is released, /r/ sound is produced as in 'raw', right, 'reap', 'rude', 'try'. 'wr' sounds /r/ when followed by vowels as in write, wrath, wreck, wrong, wrestle, wreath.

The initial sound in 'we' and 'wash' is /w/. It is produced with rounded lips and tongue raised high at the back, close to the soft palate. It is often represented by /^hw/ or /w/ as in 'when', 'while', 'what'. As a semi-vowel, it sounds /w/ as in

'woo', 'we', 'wow', west. Similarly, /j/ is a semi-vowel and the initial sound in 'yard', 'you', 'year', and 'yoke'. It is often written 'y' or 'i' as in 'odious', 'view'.

The glottal fricative /h/ is the initial sound in 'hen', 'high', happy, 'house'. It is spelt 'h' but not when 'h' is used with other words as like 'ch', 'gh', 'ph', 'ph', 'sh' and 'th'. It is silent in 'hour', 'honour', 'heir' and their derivatives. It is represented by 'wh' in 'who', 'whom', 'where'.

French Consonant Sounds

The pronunciation of French consonants is simple because many of the consonants are identical to corresponding English consonants. There are lots of similarities between English and French languages. As in English, when French consonants are spoken, airflow is interrupted or partially blocked by the position of the tongue, teeth, and/or lips. So, the phonetic symbols will pose little difficulty, since most of them are like letters with which we are already familiar. For example: /b/, /m/, /n/, /f/ and /v/. There are altogether 18 consonants in French language.

Many French consonants correspond to the English consonants, for example, /t/, /d/, /n/. There is however, a major difference in their sounds. In English, the tip of the tongue is placed on the ridge behind the upper front teeth (the alveolar ridge). In French, the tongue is placed not on the alveolar ridge but further forward behind the upper front teeth to produce sounds in such words as:

/t/	/d/	/n/
table	deux	nous
tres	des	neuf
tomates	douze	une

The French consonants 'p', 't' and 'k' are similar to the corresponding English sounds but not exactly like them. In English, a puff of air is emitted after each of these sounds as in 'pat', 'tooth', 'coop'. In pronouncing the French /p/, /t/, /k/, the puff of air characteristic of the English sound is avoided, as in

/p/	/t/	/k/
par	temps	quand
pas	tes	comme
poul	ton	car
pere	table	carte

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* In French Language, /r/ is pronounced at the back of the throat with the uvula.

* /l/ and /r/ are liquids while /w/, /j/ are vowel glides and may be realized as fricatives when they go with voiceless plosives.

The French /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are similar to English sounds in 'ship' and 'pleasure'. /ʃ/ may be recognized from the French spelling 'ch' as in 'choice', 'chaise', 'Charles'. /ʒ/ may be spelt 'j', 'ge' or 'gi' in French as in 'je', 'rouge', 'Jeanne'.

Most of the French consonants have approximately the same sound in English. The French sounds are more vigorous and definite than the English counterparts but there are however, some peculiarities.

Letter 'h' is not pronounced in French as in English language, whether it begins a word or is in the middle of a word. It is only pronounced as a letter of the alphabet when it stands alone or when it occurs in a word that is being spelt or in abbreviations. It is then pronounced /ɑʃ/, just as in English word 'ash'. Examples are:

French	English
heros/ero/	Hero
home /ɔm/	Man
heure/œ:r/	time, hour
hiver /ive:r/	winter
huile/jil/	Oil
inabite/inabité/	Uninhabited
achiever /ɑʃve/	Achieve

It is important to note that in French, usually, the last consonant in most words is not pronounced. For instance, /t/ is generally silent as in *vert* /vɛ:/, *mort* /mɔ:/ . There are also some special cases:

- Few final consonants such as **c, r, f, l**, are often pronounced (*hier*, negative, *parc*, *mal*)
- In words ending in **-pt, -ct**, we pronounce the last consonant (*contact*, *script*).
- Letter 'h' is always silent (*trahison*, *haut*).

- Diphthong 'ch' is normally pronounced like English 'sh' (*chanter*, *schema*). However, in few words, 'ch' is pronounced like English 'k' (*chaos*).
- Letters 'th' are pronounced as 't' (*theorie*).
- Letters 'gn' are normally pronounced like the 'y' of English 'crayon' (*enseignement*, *champagne*).
- Letter 'c' before 'i' and 'e' is pronounced like English 's' (*cedilla*).
- Letter 'l' is pronounced like the English /l/, but in the letter combination, 'ille' is pronounced /j/ as in 'fille', 'oeil'. There are exceptions where it is pronounced /l/ e.g 'mille', 'ville'.
- Letter 'w' exists in French and pronounced 'double v' /dubl-ve/. There are not many words in French that have letter 'w' but can be seen in words like 'whisky' /wiski:/, 'whig' /wig/.

Analysis

Having seen the English and French consonant systems, the differences and similarities existing between them should be clear to us. Definitely, they are not similar in all respects but they are in most aspects. In writing, English consonants are the same with French consonants except very few signs which do not exist in French, namely, /θ/, /ð/. They are replaced by /s/ and /z/ or even sometimes by /t/ and /d/ or even /f/ and /v/. It will not therefore be too burdensome for an English speaker learning French or a French speaker learning English to pronounce the consonants. He may only need to battle with the accents. Nevertheless, a French speaker will find it difficult to say 'house' or 'here' since /h/ is never sounded in French. He may therefore say something like /a^hs/ and /i^h/. A French speaker may exchange English /ŋ/ for French /ɲ/ when trying to pronounce English 'sing'. French /ɲ/ has no English equivalent. A French speaker who tries to pronounce English words that end with consonants is likely to drop the consonant sounds as it is done in French (Wells, 1996). A word like 'important' will not be sounded /impɔ:tənt/ but something like /æmpɔ:t̃/ by a French speaker, thereby transferring French habits to English. The so-called French semi-vowels /j, w, u/ are written differently but their sounds are not very different from English sounds.

In the face of these variations, therefore, the English language teacher will have a task while dealing with French speakers learning English. Also, a French teacher who teaches English language to French speakers will experience similar problems. He has to pay particular attention to the above variations to be able to achieve something close to "R.P." level. For instance, if we accept that the crucial

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phonetic difference between the English consonant plosives and the French plosives (the voiceless *p, t, k*) and their voiced counterparts (*b, d, g*) is that of voicing, and that if the teacher teaches his foreign or second language learners always to voice the first set and make the second set voiceless, then he would have done almost all that was necessary to establish the phonetic contrast in their speech. However, familiar sounds pose similar problems like unfamiliar sounds when they occur in unfamiliar environments and circumstances but it is worse when the sound does not exist entirely in a target language.

Steps to Correction

Jordan and Mackay (1982) suggested steps to take in correcting learner mistakes in pronunciation. According to them, the first step is to help the learner to hear his mistakes by appreciating that his own version differs from the correct one. This can be done by presenting the wrong version and following it with the correct one and making a drill of the correct version.

The second step is getting the learner to produce the correct version by himself. This is mostly achieved by imitating the teacher. At this stage the teacher will also be able to identify the sound causing difficulty and contrast it with the mother tongue of the learner. It may also be necessary to introduce native speaker models for the learner to listen and also reproduce.

The final step is to practice the correct sound to ensure it will be correctly remembered and produced in future. This can be done by drills of minimal pairs or by pronunciation games, dialogues and role playing with focus on sound contrasts. Watching situational contexts on video will also be helpful in discriminating sounds. Teaching aids like pictures, flash cards, audio machines could be used with illustrative contrastive sounds to distinguish between sounds.

It must be remembered that errors that are more prone to correction are those that most seriously interfere with intelligibility. The teacher should, therefore, note the most grave and frequent errors of pronunciation and present sounds in the two languages especially those with similar or near places of articulation, highlighting the words contexts using minimal pairs, before using them in sentences.

Implications

The academic implication of this analysis is that every language teacher must expose his students to the language system of a target language side-by-side the mother tongue to be able to differentiate between the sound contrasts. This will enable the teacher to identify areas of focus where attention must be adequately given to help learners to aim at the target language system. It will also expose the learners to the correct and desired forms. This paper believes that this method has not been adequately employed by language teachers and therefore believes that such contrastive presentations as made here will improve foreign or second language teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This paper has so far tried to present the salient things that accompany language learning. For a language learner, in a second language situation, it is only natural that elements of interference from the mother tongue bring to bear on the new language learning. What is important is identifying the areas of this interference and minimizing its effect on the intelligibility of the language learner. A good English language teacher can discover the problem areas of a French learner by contrasting the two languages to highlight the problem areas. Unless a learner is exposed to the system of a target language in contrast to his own, he may fail to see the difference.

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