Difficulties encountered by Albanian students while pronouncing English minimal pairs

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Abstract

Many foreign language learners encounter difficulties in pronouncing English language sounds, which potentially leads to misunderstanding in oral communication. Sometimes, the Albanian learners find pronunciation quite tricky when learning English language because they have to replicate lots of new strange sounds that are completely unknown to them. The present paper tackles the difficulties of producing English sounds with focus on minimal pairs, which is not an easy task, especially when the learners are not exposed to the native speakers in their environment. This research focuses on pronunciation errors with the minimal pairs committed by students of English language who study at the University of Vlora in Albania. As an experienced teacher of English Language in Albania, I have had the opportunity to observe the difficulties the Albanian speaking learners usually face in learning English pronunciation and what I have concluded is that Minimal pairs bear great benefits in pronunciation teaching and learning. There were 20 students who participated in this research and all of them had been studying English Phonology for a semester at the university. We selected six minimal pairs [i] vs. [iː], [e] vs. [æ], [u] vs. [uː], [ʌ] vs. [aː], [ɔ] vs. [ɔː], [w] vs. [v] and prepared a test for the students. The data were collected and the findings revealed the difficulties the students faced these six minimal pairs.

Keywords: difficulties; pronunciation; correct; misunderstanding; minimal pairs.

1. Introduction

There is a general consensus that language learning without "noticing" the gap in interlanguage system on the part of learners is hard to happen, Language is a communicative system without which the communication would be impossible. It is like a bridge built over the river which is used to connect the two sides of the land. Therefore, learning the language of the other side of the land is of enormous importance if the aim is to be able to talk to the participants of that particular society. Consequently, the more languages one knows the richer he is.English has become an essential medium in all the major growing countries, especially in Albania.

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From 1945 until 1991, Albania was ruled by the communist government which used to follow the Soviet model in all fields of the society, even in education. The policy followed by the Albanian Government was that of extreme isolation. After 1991, the social and political system of Albania was radically changed, from communism to democracy. This transition to democracy brought with it a lot of social changes. The most important thing was that people won the right of freedom, such as the right of moving from one place to another, the right of property, the right of religious belief etc.

Such radical social change had also a great impact on the Albanian education system, especially with regard to foreign languages. The most important foreign languages taught in Albania up to 1991 were: Russian, French and English. Russian was the language which was taught in the greatest number of schools in Albania. French and English became the second. After 1991 English and French were established as the most important languages taught in Albanian schools, overtaking the Russian, which had previously been compulsory at all levels. Gradually, English became the most preferable language, this because it offered people a greater variety of new employment and study possibilities. The new job opportunities required knowledge of English language to facilitate communication with the foreigners.

1.1. Literature review

As Laver stresses, "Speech is our most human characteristic. It is the most highly skilled muscular activity that human beings ever achieve, requiring the precise and rapid co-ordination of more than eighty different muscles, many of them paired". (Laver, 1994.) Process of speaking at a normal rate is achieved by means of some 1,400 motor commands per second to the muscles of the speech apparatus. (Lenneberg, 1967.) Speech is the prime means of communication. Furthermore, "our social interaction through speech depends on much more solely the linguistic nature of the spoken messages exchanged. The voice is the very emblem of the speaker , indelibly woven into the fabric of speech". (Laver, 1994.) In this sense, each of our utterances of spoken language carries not only its own message, but through accent, tone of voice, even the word pronunciation, it is an audible declaration presenting a kind of social identity. Nowadays, the communication through speech has expanded greatly through broadcast, television, internet and mobiles. All of them   take speech as a part of their professional domain.

Cruttenden says that: "A man possessing the normal human faculties achieves the exchange of information mainly by means of two types of sensory stimulation , auditory and visual (Cruttenden, 2001.). Children learn from a very early age to pronounce the sounds their parents use in talking to them and they begin to produce the sound pattern with which they have become familiar, i.e. they begin to make use of speech which leads to a rapid acquisition of the framework of spoken language. The learning of another language later in life will tend to be tedious but not impossible. The more firmly consolidated the basis of a first language becomes and the later in life that a second language is begun, the more learners will be subject to resistances and prejudices deriving from the framework of their original language. As we grow older, the acquisition of a new language will normally entail a great deal of conscious, analytical effort, instead of children's ready and facile imitation" (Crittenden, 2001.)

The majority of speakers in the world understand at least one language other than their own. To clarify the different status of a speaker's experiences of other languages, it is helpful to differentiate between a first language, a second language and a foreign language. "A first language is a speaker's native language or mother tongue, whose learning normally begins in the speaker's earliest experience of language-acquisition as a very small child. A second language is any other language that the speaker learns to control, at any time, to a level of near native-like proficiency. Any language spoken by a speaker to less than second-language level can be called a foreign language." (Laver, 1994.)

According to Laver, "learning a language other than one's own native language is always a process in which the patterns of the first language interfere with the learning of the foreign language." At any given

stage of acquisition of a foreign language, the linguistic competence underlying the utterances performed by the learner will show some amalgam of the patterns of the two languages. (Laver, 1994.).

According to Brown as cited in Lanteigne (2006, p. 3), "the goal of the language learners is to make sure that they can communicate what they have in mind effectively; they have to be understood when they are uttering the words. Language learners should pay more attention on the way they articulate the foreign words because pronunciation of the words is very important in communication".

As Roach mentions, "When we speak to each other, the sounds we make, have to travel from the mouth of the speaker to the ear of the listener. We can capture everything that the listener hears in the form of a recording, and then measure whichever aspect of the signal that we want to know about" (Roach, 2001.). We should set out a classification of the sounds to fit with the traditional phonetic classification of speech sounds. The number of phonemes which we arrive at by classification of the minimum recurrent segments of speech utterances is quite limited. Each phone of the language is an allophone of one or other phoneme, and is recognizable as such, either on the articulatory level by the presence of a set of distinctive sound features. Such a set of features is characteristic of each phoneme and realized phonetically in each of its allophones – with few exceptions (Brosnahan & Malmberg, 1970.). In the selection from the totality of phonetic features languages may differ, so we can say that features which are relevant in phonemic oppositions in one language, need not be so in another language. Thus, for example, the feature of plosiveness is opposed to the feature of fricativeness in English language as: [d] and [ð], as in [dɛn] and [ðɛn), since to the English speaker these are different words, but in some other languages [d] and [ð] are allophones of [d].

1.1.1. Differences between English and Albanian Language

According to Jones, in phonology, "minimal pairs are pairs of words or phrases in a particular language, spoken or signed, that differ in only one phonological element, such as a phoneme, toneme or chroneme". (Jones, 1944). English language can be categorized as a difficult language to master. There are different opinions about the reasons, for example: Vernick and Nesgoda state that "language learners may find difficulties in learning to speak English well because several spelling may be represented by a single sound". (Vernick & Nesgoda, 1980). Another linguist, Lanteigne, conforms that "difficulties in learning English occur due to the fact that some of English sounds do not exist in the mother tongue of the learners". (Lanteigne, 2006). That is, learners fail to produce certain sounds that are absent in their mother tongue. The current study focuses on some pronunciation issues among Albanian EFL learners, particularly with regard to minimal pair sounds that sometimes make confusions for the Albanian learners.

English language has got twelve monophthongs or pure vowels which are classified into two main groups: long vowels (five long vowels) and short vowels (seven short vowels). The Albanian language has got seven vowels which have same length. The English contrastive monophthongs (minimal pairs) sometimes cause substantial problems in the learners' articulation as well as perception of utterances because the difference between them is not that much exercised in the Albanian language. This is because, differently from the English language, vowel length in the Albanian language is neither a phonetic aspect, nor a phonological one. (Alimemaj, Z., 2014)

1.1.2. Pronunciation difficulties faced by Albanian learners

I have been working as teacher-researcher of EFL for more than thirty years and I have had practical experience of and the opportunity to observe the difficulties that the Albanian speaking learners usually face in learning English pronunciation.

Most Albanian learners of English, usually, find the pronunciation of long vowels difficult and problematic, for example, in the words "sheep" [ʃiːp] and "ship" [ʃɪp], the Albanian learners confuse

the long [i:] with the short [i]. They also find it difficult to make the difference between the pronunciation of the open vowels and closed vowels, for example [æ] and [e] as in man [m æ n] and men [m e n] which results in confusing singular with plural. (Alimemaj, Z., 2014)

Another problem encountered by the Albanian learners of English language is the pronunciation of the phoneme [w]. Neither the letter "w" nor the phoneme [w] exist in the Albanian language. It is rather difficult for the Albanian learners to distinguish the pronunciation of [w] from [u] or [v], they pronounce them, almost in the same way. The Albanian linguists are faced with the problem to find a solution for a new letter to be added to the Albanian alphabet (Lloshi, 2005).

Notably, there are some deviations made by the Albanian students in articulating [ð] and [θ]. The replacement of [ð] with [θ] as in "that" is a kind of deviation made by the students because of the influence of their mother tongue, so that they pronounce it like [θ e t] instead of [ð æ t]. This deviation, usually happens in initial position before a vowel sound.

Minimal pairs can be used as a technique to distinguish words which consist of same sounds but a different phoneme, for example: cup [k ∧ p] and cub [k ∧ b].

During my work as a teacher of Phonology, I have examined the effectiveness of using minimal pairs as a teaching technique in facing the pronunciation difficulties among the Albanian students.

Many English language learners, as well as the Albanian ones, tend to make mistakes in the articulation of the sounds. Therefore, this research deals with some phonological mistakes done by the Albanian students in producing English sounds, mainly, minimal pairs.

1.2. Research questions

1. What are phonological mistakes done by Albanian students in producing English minimal pairs?

2. Which minimal pairs are more difficult to pronounce by the Albanian students?

3. What are the pronunciation mistakes done because of influence of mother tongue?

2. Method

The analysis of this research consists of three steps: Firstly we identified the problems.The data were derived through students' performance test by using minimal pair test. The test mainly focused on testing the students' oral activity than their written as the learning outcome. The students had to listen some words to a tape recorder which contained minimal pairs. Then they were told to say and write down the words they listened and transcribe them by using the pronunciation symbols. Secondly, we checked their tasks and used to collect the data. Having checked their work, we began to find out the mistakes and identify the errors by comparing each student's pronunciation with the standard phonetic transcription. Then, we listed down all the deviations and tried to find out the difficulties the Albanian students usually encountered while pronouncing the given words with minimal pairs.

2.1. Sample / Participants

Describe The target group of this study were advanced students who study English language at the University of Vlora in Albania. Subjects of English were Albanian native speakers. There were thirty students who were classified into one experimental group. All of the students hadn't been in an English-speaking country before. All the students had had prior exposure to EFL in primary and secondary schools in Albania. They had chosen to study English language at the university and one of the main subjects they used to study was Phonology.

The research was based on the phonetic transcription of the words which contained minimal pairs that were mispronounced by this target group. The source of data was from the phonetic transcription of the recorded pronunciation of twenty students who study English at the University of Vlora in Albania.

The phonetic transcription of the students' pronunciation was restricted only to the transcription of the words which contained the following minimal pairs:

[i] vs. [i:], [e] vs. [æ], [u] vs. [u:], [ʌ] vs. [a:], [ɔ] vs. [ɔ:], [w] vs. [v]. Differences in vowel quality are produced by different shapes of the oral cavity". Characteristic vowel qualities are determined by (a) the height of the tongue in the mouth; (b) the part of the tongue raised (front, middle, or back); (c) the configuration of the lips; and (d) the tension of the muscles of the oral tract.

2.2. Instrument(s)

Tool of data collecting in this research is Minimal Pairs test, a test that focused on the difficulties the students encountered while pronouncing short and long vowels. The test included 5 groups of words for each pair of short and long vowels. The total number of words the students had to pronounce and transcribe was 60. So, each student had to express in a written form the transcription of 60 words, the total was 180 words altogether. From all these 180 phonetic pronunciation transcription of the given English words, we found out that there were. The students were given a sheet of paper with minimal pairs grouped in a table as following:

Listen to the tape recorder and group the words according to the following table. Then write down their transcription, example:

Words	Minimal		pairs			
	[i] and [i:]	[u] and [u:]	[æ] and [e]	[ɔ] and [ɔ:]	[ʌ] and [a:]	[w] and [v]
Bed – bad			[bæd], [bed]			
Sheep-ship	[ʃi:p], [ʃip]					
Will-veal						[wil], [vil]
Pull-pool		[pul], [pu:l]				

All the tests were checked and conducted in order to obtain the data of the students' problems in pronouncing short and long vowels as well as other pronunciation problems. After collecting the data, we analyzed them. We made the percentage of incorrect pronunciation with the focus to minimal pairs. The result is shown in the table below. The list of words given was as below:

[i] vs. [i:]	[æ] vs. [e]	[ʌ] vs. [a:]	[u] vs. [u:]	[ɔ] vs. [ɔ:]	[w] vs. [v]
Bit - beat	Man - men	Cart - card	Pull - pool	Cod - cord	Wiser - viser
Sit - seat	Bad - bed	Cut - cart	Use (n)- use (v)	Don - dawn	West - vest
Live - leave	Bag - beg	Much - march	Mull - mule	Stock - stalk	Wiper - viper
Fill - feel	Pan - pen	Larch - large	Full - fool	Bold - balled	Whale - veil
This - these	Cattle - kettle	Luck - lark	Suit - soot	Rot - wrought	Will – veal

2.3. Data collection procedures

The research was conducted in three sessions:

Session 1   (15 minutes) listen to the words in the tape recorder
Session 2   (15 minutes) identify the minimal pairs in the words listened

Session 3   (30 minutes) write down the words transcription and identify the different sound.
From those 180 phonetic pronunciation transcriptions of the English words, we found out that there were 17 students who deviated long [i:] to short [i]; 23 students who deviated [æ] to [e]; 19 students who deviated long [u:] to short [u]; 21 students who deviated [ɔ:] to [ɔ]; 12 students who deviated [w] to [v] and 15 students who deviated [a:] to [Λ] and [a].

3. Findings and Results

3.1. The first minimal pair was: long [i:] vs. short [i].

To pronounce these sounds, the front of the tongue is raised to a height slightly below and behind the front close position; the lips are spread, the tongue is tense, with the side rims making a a firm contact with the upper molars (Gimson, 1962)

It is very important for EFL learners to acquire the quantitative relationship of [i:] and [i]. The distinction is a complex of quality and quantity. The opposition of the difference of vowels length is essential for the Albanian learners so that to avoid misunderstanding between speakers.

The Albanian learners don't find the English vowel [i] much difficult to pronounce because they have got [i] vowel   in their native language too. They, usually, find the long monophthongs of English language difficult and problematic for their length of pronunciation, so that, sometimes, they use short vowels instead of long ones.

3.2. The second minimal pair was: long [u:] vs. short [u].

The deviation was [u:] to [u]The short vowel [u] is pronounced with a part of the tongue nearer to center than to back raised just above the close-mid position. The tongue is laxly held compared with the tenser [u:], no firm contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars. The Albanian learners find it difficult to distinguish long [u:] from short[u] by quality and quantity; more difficult for them is to define the relationship between them. For example, it should be noted that in this research, 25 students confuse the pronunciation of "use" (v) [ju:z] with "use" (n) [jus].

3.3. The third minimal pair was: long [ɔ:] vs. short [ɔ].

This vowel [ɔ] is a back and mid vowel (back tongue is raised) and the lips are well rounded during production. It is articulated with medium lip-rounding; the back of the tongue is raised between the open-mid and close-mid positions, no contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars.

The number of the students who made incorrect pronunciation of the words containing this minimal pair was 21. Based on the data, greater number of the incorrect pronunciation was for long [ɔ:] than for short [ɔ]. This is because the students are influenced by their native Albanian language which lacks long vowels. The spelling forms of [ɔ:] often cause difficulty for the learners. No [r] should be pronounced where it occurs in the spelling of words such as port, sort, lord, more, except when, in a word-final position (Gimson, 1962). Based on the data collected, 15 students made incorrect pronunciation and of the word "cord", they pronounced short [ɔ] instead of long [ɔ:] followed by [r].

3.4. The forth minimal pair was: [æ] vs. [e].

For the pronunciation of [e], the front of the tongue is raised between the close- mid and open-mid positions; the lips are loosely spread and slightly wider apart than for [i]; the tongue may have more tension than in the case of [i], the side rims making a light contact with the upper molars.

For the pronunciation of [æ] the mouth is more open than for [e]; the front of the tongue is raised to a position midway just above open, with the side rims making a very slight contact with the back upper molars, the lips are neutrally open (Gimson, 1962). The pronunciation of English [æ] presents difficulties to Albanian learners whose native language possesses one type of [e].

One of the mistakes they make is that, sometimes, they use [æ] instead of [e] which results in confusing singular and plural of the nouns as in "man" and "men". In this research 23 students deviated [æ] for [e] in the pronunciation of the words "bad" and "bed"; "man" and "men"; "bag" and "beg". This is because, differently from the English language, vowel length in Albanian language is neither a phonetic aspect, nor a phonological one.

3.5. The fifth minimal pair was: [w] vs. [v].

The English sound [v] is a voiced labiodental fricative; [w] is a labial-velar approximant sound. The Albanian language lacks the sound [w], that's why the Albanian students find it rather strange to pronounce. In this research we noticed that 12 students tended to make errors in pronouncing [w], they made one kind of deviation, that is, [w] was replaced with [v]. The students mixed up [w] and [v] sounds which is problematic because it sounds like you are saying completely different words and people won't understand each-other, for example they said "vest' for "west" (west is a direction, while vest is something to wear). The reason behind this substitution of the sound [w] for sound [v] might occur mainly due to the fact that Albanian phonetic system does not have [w]. The students have a tendency to use the same sound for both [w] and [v]. They should take care to distinguish pairs such as vine, wine; veal, wheel; vent, went etc. using friction between the lower lip and upper teeth for [v].

### 3.6. The sixth minimal pair was: short [ʌ] vs. long [a:].

The normally long vowel [a:] is articulated with a considerable separation of the jaws and the lips neutrally open; a part of the tongue between the centre and back is in the fully open position, no contact being made between the rims of the tongue and the upper molars (Gimson, 1962).

The short [ʌ] is articulated with a considerable separation of the jaws and with the lips neutrally open; the centre of the tongue is raised just above the fully open position, no contact being made between the tongue and the upper molars.

The Albanian language doesn't possess a long [a:]. Confusions between the two vowels [ʌ, a:] are common by Albanian speakers. From data collected in this research, 15 students deviated long [a:] for short [ʌ]. They should learn that in English language, a proper qualitative distinction should be maintained between the vowels in words such as cart, card; cut, cart; much, march; larch, large; luck, lark.

Number of students	Students' mistakes	Minimal pair	Kind of deviation	Percentage of mistakes
30	17	Bit - beat Sit - seat Live - leave Fill - feel This - these	[i: → I]	56 %
30	19	Pull - pool Use (n)- use (v) Mull - mule Full - fool	[u: → u]	63 %

		Suit - soot		
30	21	Cod - cord Don - dawn Stock - stalk Bold - balled Rot - wrought	[ɔː → ɔ]	70 %
30	15	Cart - card Cut - cart Much - march Larch - large Luck - lark	[a: → ʌ]	50 %
30	23	Man - men Bad - bed Bag - beg Pan - pen Cattle - kettle	[æ → e]	76 %
30	12	Wiser - viser West - vest Wiper - viper Whale - veil Will – veal	[w → v]	40 %
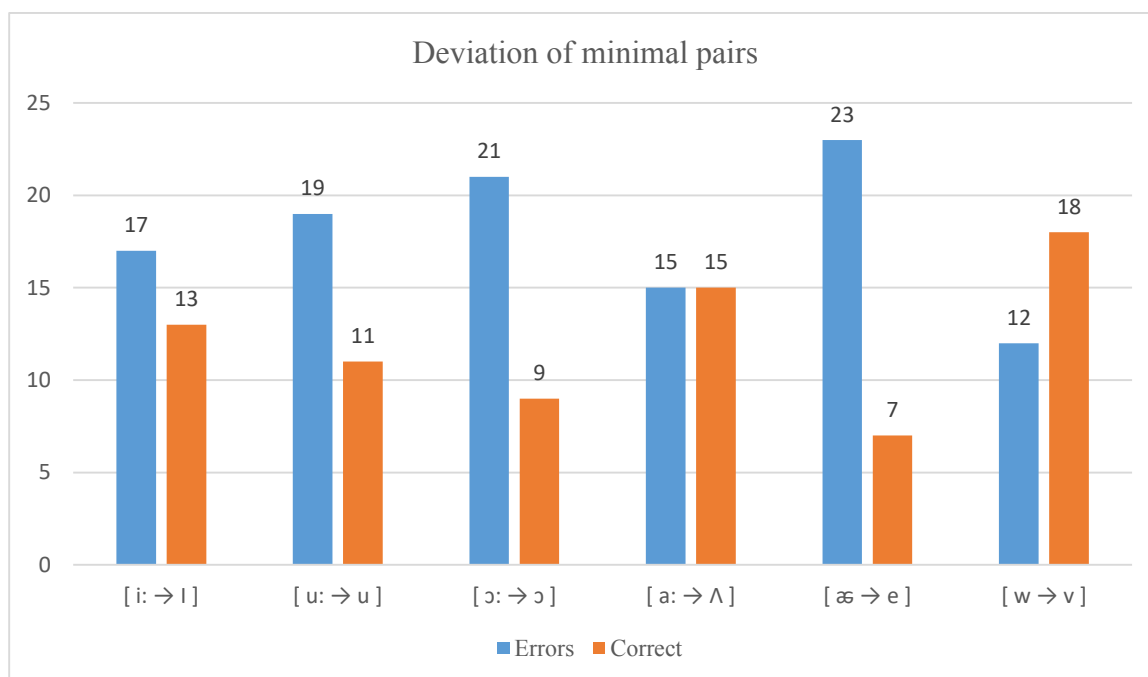
4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to tackles the difficulties faced by Albanian students, while producing English sounds with focus on minimal pairs, which is not an easy task, especially when the learners are not exposed to the native speakers in their environment. This research focuses on pronunciation errors with

the minimal pairs committed by students of Bachelor level who study English language at University of Vlora in Albania.

Albanian language has a less complex vowel system than English language, that is why the Albanian learners find it difficult to produce qualitative sounds considering minimal pairs. From the tables shown above, it can be observed that one of the problems learners have is the establishment of the qualitative oppositions: long vowels versus short vowels, such as [u:] vs. [u], [i:] vs. [i], [ɔ:] vs. [ɔ].

Sometimes, the pronunciation of oppositions like long and short vowels involves difficulties of quantity because of the influence of Albanian language which is characterised by mid vowels.

Albanian learners should also be very careful with the pronunciation of the oppositions [æ] vs. [e] as in words *bad* and *bed,* because, sometimes it happens to create misunderstandings while talking because of the influence of Albanian language which has got only seven vowels: (i, u, a, e, ë, o, y).

Many of the participants (40%) encounter difficulties in producing the /w/ sound accurately and risk confusion with the pronunciation of /v/ or /u/ which are so much used in their native language. Cares should be taken to distinguish one phoneme from the other and use them in a correct way.

5. Conclusions

The full system of 20 vowels and 24 consonants of English is rather complex compared with the system of Albanian language which has got 29 consonants and 7 vowels.

Based on the results and findings gathered in this research, it is concluded that some teaching techniques and strategies should be applied to improve the pronunciation of minimal pairs while teaching English language to foreign learners to avoid misunderstandings while speaking.

Crystal (2008) points out that "a minimal pair carries two words which are similar to each other except for only one sound which can be vowel as well as a consonant", (for example, cat and bat, it and fat and so on). It is also supported by Tuan (2010), he explains that "minimal pairs are pairs of words that differ in meaning on the basis of a change in only one sound". Based on the three explanations above the researchers can conclude that minimal pair is a pair of words which differ by only one sound. Teaching pronunciation by using this technique, supposed be able to help students to establish the habit of thinking in English.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: November 30, 2020).

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Arnavut öğrencilerin İngilizce minimal çiftleri telaffuz ederken karşılaştıkları zorluklar

Öz

Yabancı dil öğrenenlerin çoğu İngilizce seslerini telaffuz etmede zorluklarla karşılaşır ve bu da sözlü iletişimde potansiyel olarak yanlış anlamalara yol açar. Bazen, Arnavut öğrenciler İngilizce öğrenirken telaffuzu oldukça zor bulurlar çünkü tamamen bilmedikleri birçok yeni tuhaf sesi kopyalamak zorunda kalırlar. Bu makale, özellikle öğrenciler çevrelerinde anadili olan konuşmacılara maruz kalmadıklarında, kolay bir iş olmayan, minimal çiftlere odaklanarak İngilizce sesler üretmenin zorluklarını ele almaktadır. Bu araştırma, Arnavutluk'taki Vlora Üniversitesi'nde okuyan İngiliz dili öğrencileri tarafından yapılan minmal çiftlerle telaffuz hatalarına odaklanmaktadır. Arnavutluk'ta deneyimli bir İngiliz Dili öğretmeni olarak, Arnavutça konuşan öğrencilerin genellikle İngilizce telaffuz öğrenirken karşılaştıkları zorlukları gözlemleme fırsatım oldu ve sonuca vardığım şey Minimal çiftlerin telaffuz öğretiminde ve öğreniminde büyük faydalar sağladığıydı. Bu araştırmaya katılan 20 öğrenci vardı ve hepsi üniversitede bir dönem İngilizce Sesbilimi eğitimi alıyordu. Altı minimum çift [i] - [iː], [e] - [æ], [u] - [uː], [ʌ] - [aː], [ɔ] - [ɔː], [w] - [v] ve öğrenciler için bir test hazırladı. Veriler toplanmış ve bulgular, öğrencilerin bu altı minimal çiftle karşılaştıkları zorlukları ortaya çıkarmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: zorluklar; telaffuz; doğru; yanlış anlama; küçük eşleştirmeler.

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