

Abstract

Thematic Panel: Brazilian Spoken Corpora

Title: A study of the production of aspiration by Brazilian learners of English

Aims

This paper aims at studying and describing the production of aspiration by Brazilian learners of English with the objective of contributing with knowledge about this feature of pronunciation, which may be important for teachers and materials producers. Aspiration is a quick projection of air released after voiceless stops when they are found in stressed syllables before vowel sounds. It is measured in milliseconds and is usually longer in native speakers than in second language (L2) learners (Alves & Magro, 2011). Most importantly, aspiration contributes decisively to intelligibility, which is the ability to understand and make oneself understood, according to Jenkins (2000). So, an understanding of the way aspiration operates in the speech of learners is important to help them improve their oral communication abilities.

Methodology

We utilized the recordings of eleven students of Letters, who were at the intermediate and advanced levels of English. These recordings are part of the oral corpus LINDSEI-BR, which is the Brazilian branch of the international project LINDSEI. The students participated on semi-structured interviews, in which they had total freedom to explore a variety of themes, thus, producing authentic language. In this way, our study differs from others found in the literature, which collected data using pre-fabricated exercises that the students had to perform in order to produce aspiration (Zimmer, 2006; Alves & Magro, 2011; França, 2011). The recordings were analysed using the software Praat, which allows the researcher to measure the length of the students' aspirations.

Results

The main results we found were: a) like other phenomena pertaining to students' interlanguage, aspiration can be produced in an inconsistent way, so, this inconsistency was taken into account in our interpretation of data; b) because of the influence of the percentage of inconsistencies, our results contradict others found in the literature, mainly regarding the production of aspiration in the phoneme /k/, which exhibited a percentage of correct items smaller than that of the phoneme /p/, but with a bigger percentage of

inconsistencies; c) aspects like syllable length and speed of speech were found to exert an influence over the duration of aspiration: the longer the production of the syllable, the longer the aspiration made by the learners; the same applies to the speed of speech: in general, the slower the speed, the longer the aspirations; d) similar to what Eskildsem (2008) suggests, lexical items which students usually learn in the basic level of study tend to have their pronunciation fossilized and may demand more effort from the students for their correct production, for example, *because, teacher, teach, people, picture, okay*. In conclusion, our results contribute with aspects regarding students' production of aspiration which had not been detected in similar studies and can provide teachers and textbook authors with new data about this phenomenon. We recognize that more studies, using more students from different backgrounds and with more varied command of the language, are needed in order to produce more solid results. Nevertheless, we hope our findings and their future applications will help improve the pronunciation of Brazilian learners of English.

Keywords: pronunciation; aspiration; language teaching and learning

References

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