

# Fricatives and Affricates of English: A Case Study of Assamese Learners of English

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## **Introduction**

Vocabulary and its accurate pronunciation play a pivotal role in learning a language. When we consider the phonological aspect of vocabulary, it includes both the vowels (monophthongs and diphthongs) and consonantal sounds. Teaching and learning of English and its vocabulary are unsatisfactory in Assamese medium schools, especially in rural areas. The present article attempts to study the learning of some difficult sounds of English language, especially fricatives and affricates. Through the article, I have tried to identify the reasons behind the phonological problems encountered by English language teachers and students in Assamese medium schools, and recommend remedial measures in order to improve the second language teaching-learning scenario.

Fricatives and Affricates are the two classes of consonantal speech sounds that Assamese learners of English either pronounce wrongly, or find most difficult to pronounce. In the articulation of fricatives, the active and passive articulators form a stricture of close approximation, and the air escapes through the narrow gap, causing audible friction. Affricates on the other hand, are a combination of a plosive and a fricative. Instead of a complete closure of the vocal tract, there is a delayed release in the articulation of affricates.

The objective of this research is to ascertain the accurate pronunciation of these two classes of speech sounds of English language.

Learning the vocabulary of a language is indeed

a complex process. The primary aim of students while learning vocabulary is to have the ability to recall a word at will, and to recognize it in its spoken and written forms. The principles of learning English vocabulary in a proper and systematic way are based on the assumptions that learners can be taught, and can teach themselves. Teaching and learning is a complementary process since the teacher has to follow the same principles that are required by the student for learning purposes. Hence, language learning is not an activity that takes place in vacuum.

Vocabulary is central to language and is of great significance to language learners. David Wilkins (1972), summed up the importance of vocabulary for language learning: “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p. 111).

It has been observed that most Assamese learners seem to have an instrumental motivation for learning English. They learn English simply to fulfil the school requirement, since English is a compulsory subject like any other subject. In the indigenized varieties of English (IVEs) setting, “the reasons for studying English and the skills desired are overwhelmingly the ones normally labelled instrumental” (Shaw, 1981, p. 121). Often, lack of motivation becomes one of the main reasons that a majority of the students fail the examination, or remain low achievers. Students find the English period uninteresting and difficult, and that also impacts motivation levels.

### The problematic consonantal phonemes

As mentioned earlier, Assamese-speaking learners of English language find consonantal phonemes of English difficult and problematic. These problematic consonantal phonemes include seven out of nine English fricatives, and two affricates of English. These are:

Fricatives: /f, v, θ, ð, z, ʃ, ʒ/ are non-existent in Assamese.

For example, many Assamese students would find it difficult to pronounce 'fan, van, thin, they, zebra, ship and measure' accurately.

Affricates: /tʃ, dʒ/ are also non-existent in Assamese.

These sounds appear in words like 'church and judge'.

### Assamese rendering of sounds

It has been observed that the English fricatives and affricates as spoken by the Assamese show different properties as compared to the way fricatives and affricates are pronounced by the native speakers of English. It should be clear that it is NOT the case that the Assamese children hear the native sounds and render them as plosives or fricatives. On the contrary, they reproduce what they hear from their teachers and may be parents. They seem to be replaced by some easier and similar sounding sounds, in accordance with the law of least effort as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1966). These sounds are:

- |             |                                 |
|-------------|---------------------------------|
| a) /f/→/ph/ | e.g. /fæn/ 'fan'→/phEn/         |
| b) /v/→/bh/ | e.g. /væn/ 'van'→/bhEn/         |
| c) /θ/→/th/ | e.g. /θæŋk/ 'thank'→/thEŋk/     |
| d) /ð/→/d/  | e.g. /ðen/ 'then'→/den/         |
| e) /z/→/j/  | e.g. /zu:/ 'zoo'→/ju/           |
| f) /ʃ/→/s/  | e.g. /ʃɪp/ 'ship' →/sip/        |
| g) /ʒ/→/j/  | e.g. /vɪʒn/ 'vision' →/bhijOn/  |
| h) /tʃ/→/s/ | e.g. /tʃeɪndʒ/ 'change' →/senj/ |
| i) /dʒ/→/j/ | e.g. /dʒɔɪ/ 'joy' →/jɔi/        |

### Causes of the phonological problems

Teachers play a crucial role as far as second language teaching is concerned as they have the authority to adopt effective approaches or methods as well as suitable teaching strategies. However, for this language teachers have to be proficient enough in the language they are teaching to be role models for their students. They also have to be cautious of their own shortcomings as wrong pronunciation on their part may result in a negative image of the language in the minds of their students. Gatenby (1967) is right when he says, "If we can train the teacher, make him efficient, and give him confidence, he can himself remove or get rid of most of the other drawbacks" (p. 213).

Some of the reasons for the problems encountered by English teachers of Assamese medium schools while teaching English pronunciation include:

- The teachers themselves do not know the correct pronunciations.
- In-service training programmes are not compulsory for teachers and are generally conducted for a short duration. Moreover, the notification regarding training of teachers normally does not reach schools on time. Also, very often, school authorities are reluctant to send the teachers for training as the number of professional trainers is very small.

Thus, teachers of English in Assamese medium schools are not normally exposed to the phonetic features of the English language so as to teach their students correct pronunciation of English words. Most of them have a lack of comparative knowledge of English sounds and Assamese sounds, not being able to correct the spoken form of English words of their students.

- Oral work is not encouraged or practised sufficiently by the teachers.

- Most of the English language teachers in Assamese medium schools do not have a specialization in English. Some of them are just matriculate, and surprisingly, they are allowed to teach English without having a basic knowledge of the language themselves.

In order to have a clear picture of the teaching-learning scenario of English in the upper primary level of Assamese medium schools, the problems faced by learners are also a subject of concern. It is evident that when Assamese students learn English, they come across speech sounds that are quite different from those of Assamese. They often find it difficult to articulate these sounds. Therefore, they substitute these English speech sounds with speech sounds of Assamese. This pull of Assamese causes unintelligibility. Such problems are meant to be handled by the language teacher in the classroom. However, it is debatable whether the language teacher takes note of these problems and makes the necessary corrections. Also, Assamese students do not get enough exposure to English. Not only does this contribute to difficulties in articulating the correct pronunciation, but it also impacts spellings, as the students are not able to perceive the correct spelling as a result of faulty pronunciation.

### **Suggestions and recommendations**

I have made an attempt to suggest academic principles in general and pedagogical practices in particular that underline the teaching of phonology of English vocabulary in the context of Assamese medium schools. These can help us to understand the problems related to teaching and learning English and its vocabulary in such schools.

### **Academic factors**

- In-service training programmes should be made compulsory for teachers, and they

should be conducted for a longer duration. The concerned authorities must ensure that the notification regarding training of teachers should reach the schools on time. The school authorities should allow the teachers to go for training so that they can improve their skills as well as equip themselves with the new teaching methods and modern techniques.

- Teachers of English in Assamese medium schools should be exposed to the phonetic features of English language, so that they can teach their students correct pronunciation of English words. They should also have a comparative knowledge of English and Assamese sounds, so that they are able to correct the spoken English of their students.
- Efficient and knowledgeable teachers should be recruited to teach English. The selection of teachers should be impartial and fair.
- Oral work should be encouraged and practised.

### **Pedagogical issues**

Careful attention must be accorded to pronunciation as it is an essential part of vocabulary teaching if the new English lexis is to be used effectively, or understood without difficulty. The degree of attention paid to the pronunciation of a lexical item depends on the importance of the item in spoken English, and the extent to which it poses a problem for the students.

Before teaching new pronunciations, the teachers should highlight the new vocabulary while writing it on the blackboard. They should use the technique of 'Mimicry-Memorization' through repetition drills to teach pronunciation. In addition to this, teachers may use minimal pairs to teach two similar sounds that are

problematic for the students. Error-analysis and correction in different areas of pronunciation helps students distinguish between vowel sounds—in rounding or reduction of rounding, in the lengthening or shortening of vowels, and in the consonant sounds absent in Assamese or in consonant clusters.

In order to teach the pronunciation of problematic fricatives and affricates of English, the teacher should utilize the following sequence:

1. Articulate the sound in a word.
2. Articulate the sound by itself.
3. Get the students to repeat the sound, in chorus.
4. Contrast it with other reinforced sounds.
5. Get individual students to repeat contrasting sounds.

The teacher may also write down all new words that the students have encountered during the week on the board. He/she should then articulate the words, and the students should repeat them. Then the learners should take turns articulating the words independently and the teacher should give them feedback on their pronunciation.

The articulation of the fricatives /f, v, θ, ð, z, ʃ, ʒ / in the lexis must be given special attention as they do not have equivalent sounds in Assamese. Similarly, /tʃ and dʒ/ also need special care, and the language teacher must make sure that these are articulated and pronounced correctly.

- a) For the production of /f/ and /v/, the Assamese medium learners have to be told to keep their upper teeth very close to their lower lip, and not to bring their upper and lower lip into contact. The air in the vocal tract must be allowed to flow continuously, causing friction. It is important to also understand the difference between the

voiceless (when the vocal chords are not vibrating) and the voiced (when the vocal chords are vibrating) sounds. /f/ is voiceless but /v/ is voiced. In fact, that is the only difference between these two sounds.

- b) For the production of /è/ sound, the learners should be told not to touch their teeth with their tongue, but to keep it very close to them, and subsequently allow the air to escape slowly and continuously.
- c) With regard to /ð/, the learners have to form a stricture of close approximation instead of a stricture of complete closure. They have to be taught the basic difference between a fricative and a plosive. Once again, in order to articulate this sound the learner needs to bring the tongue very close to the teeth without touching them. Although this needs a bit of practice, the language teacher can handle it in the classroom. One should also remember that /è/ is voiceless and /ð/ is voiced.
- d) In order to articulate /ʃ/, the Assamese learners of English have to be asked to raise the blade of their tongue to touch the hard palate, keeping the tip of the tongue level with the teeth ridge and rounding the lips slightly. Note that /ʃ/ is voiceless.
- e) For the production of /z/, the learners have to be taught to lower the body of the tongue, and place the tip of the tongue very close to the alveolar ridge so that the air can escape continuously through the narrow gap instead of touching the hard palate with the blade of the tongue. One should remember that /z/ is voiced.
- f) The Assamese medium learners can be taught to pronounce /ʒ/ by raising the blade of the tongue and placing it very close to the hard palate, getting the lips slightly rounded.

- g) For the correct articulation of /tʃ/, the learners must understand that /tʃ/ is a combination of /t/ and /ʃ/. During the articulation of /tʃ/, there is a complete closure of the oral passage and then there is a delayed release or continued flow of air. The learners have to be taught to stop the air passage by firmly placing the blade of the tongue on the teeth ridge in /t/ position, build up air pressure between the palate and the tongue, and then to release the pressure by quickly bringing the tongue to /ʃ/ position.
- h) The same remedial measure is suggested for acquiring /dʒ/. The language teacher has to demonstrate the difference between a voiced sound and its voiceless counterpart. The learner then needs to acquire the voice feature by regular practice. Note that /tʃ/ is voiceless and /dʒ/ is voiced.

### Conclusion

So far, we have looked at the difficulties of the Assamese learners of English and how they pronounce native English fricatives and affricates differently; the fricatives /f, v, ð, ð/ are replaced by stops /ph, bh, th, d/ unlike /z, ʃ, ʒ/ in place of which they use fricatives /ʒ, s, ʒ/. Similarly, instead of affricates, fricatives are used. The learners must be made aware of the basic difference between a fricative and a plosive, and between an affricate and a plosive. Finally, the language teacher must take into account the fact that in addition to the input received from teachers and parents and the peer group, the law of least effort is one of the causes of sound replacement; they should accordingly make changes in the language teaching process.

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