

Reconstructing English Postalveolar Sequences: The Case of Serbian EFL Learners

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1. Introduction

Many adult second language learners seem to reach native-like proficiency in the domains of morphology and syntax, but they have difficulty attaining the same proficiency level in the areas of phonology and phonetics (Scovel, 1969, 1988). Many EFL teachers have witnessed their students' struggle to overcome various pronunciation problems, the practice of which does not always result in the much desired improvement. The EFL teachers aware of their students' pronunciation difficulties, caused by the articulatory basis of L1, very often encounter the results of interference of the mother tongue on English.

One of the starting points of interference elimination may be seen in a descriptive approach to pronunciation teaching, based on the articulatory phonetic facts. This tool may help raise the students' awareness of the differences between speech segments which show subtle differences in L1 and L2, which are often accidentally ignored by EFL learners. Some authors believe that an articulatory approach is an indispensable part of pronunciation teaching (See Hancock 2003; James & Smith 2006). When introducing a new speech sound, a vocal tract diagram with the specific positions of the speech organs involved is provided in the introductory passage and it is only after this step, that further exercises in various forms follow (drills, for instance).

Such an approach is very useful when introducing similar sounds as they appear in L1 and L2. The 'faulty' similarity may be based not only on the perception of sounds, but on identical IPA representations as well (the IPA symbols used for the Serbian and English /t/ and /d/ sounds cannot show the important differences between), which additionally complicates the matter.

Similar phonetic items appearing in different languages are often treated as members of the same category. The acquisition of phonological contrasts of L1 influences the perception of the sound patterns of another language (Ingram 2002). For instance, some studies (Engstrand and Krull, 1994; Hussain and Nair, 1995; Pierrehumbert, Beckman, and Ladd, 2001) have revealed that phonologically similar categories have different phonetic properties in different languages, and these detailed differences must be learned by native speakers to achieve a native accent in production. Thus, second language learners often fail to disregard such minute differences, which results in their inability to attain target-like proficiency in L2 pronunciation.

This paper deals with one of the biggest pronunciation problems encountered by Serbian EFL learners who are often misled by the Serbian affricates, which seem to be acceptable substitutions for the English postalveolar consonant clusters /tr/ and /dr/, even at the university level. This confusion is analysed from the auditory perspective, and some solution for overcoming the pronunciation difficulty are also offered.

2. The consonants of Serbian

The Serbian consonantal system is very complex and a layman could assume that within a wide variety of consonantal shades, almost every English consonant may be able to find a very close approximation. Unfortunately, the situation in the field may deviate from this assumption. A detailed list of twenty-five consonants used in the Serbian language follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Serbian consonants¹

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar
Plosive	p b		t d				k g
Affricate			ts		tʃ dʒ	ʦ ʣ	
Nasal	m			n		ɲ	
Fricative		f	s z		ʃ ʒ		x
Trill				r			
Approximant		ʋ				j	
Lateral approximant				l		ʎ	

It is rightfully assumed that some English consonantal values would have a satisfactory counterpart in the Serbian consonantal subsystem. The Serbian nasals /m/ and /n/ would do as perfect substitutions of their English counterparts. This is due to the universal nature of nasal consonants, especially the bilabial and the alveolar one which are used in many languages of the world (Laver, 1994:211; Čubrović, 2005:154). Maddieson (1984:61) reports that out of 317 languages he included in his survey, only four of them had no nasal segments in their phonemic inventories. Generally speaking, fricatives are not hugely troublesome either, with the exception of the marked ‘th’ sounds of English. The Serbian phonological system does not make use of these, as is the case in a large majority of languages spoken in Europe.

An interesting case which has recently raised some debate is the manner of articulation of the Serbian voiced labiodental approximant [ʋ], which has been classified as a fricative for many decades now (cf. Stanojčić et al., 1989:32). Despite these obvious differences in the manner of articulation of the English /v/ and the Serbian approximant, this substitution does not seem to imply the existence of a foreign accent in the speech of a Serbian EFL learner.

Although many Serbian consonants would do as satisfactory substitutions of the consonants of English, one of the most complex obstacles is the difference in the articulation of some plosives. Serbian /t/ and /d/ are dental, whereas the English consonants are classified as alveolar speech sounds.

Being aware of the differences in consonantal articulations, a pronunciation teacher should pay special attention to such areas. Another question often raised is the issue of the necessary degree of ‘nativeness’, and I emphasize here that I am speaking about the students of English language and literature, most of whom will teach English to others. In such cases, Pronunciation should be one of the elements they need to work on, alongside with grammar, dictation, translation, etc.

¹ Based on Landau *et al.* (2005).

3. What to teach first?

When the teacher's task deals with the pronunciation improvement, the results often come very slowly, but steadily. The students should first become acquainted with the basics of articulatory phonetics, vocal tract diagrams, as well as with the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet. The so-called *bottom-up approach* in pronunciation teaching prioritizes the teaching of segmentals (Levis 2005). This choice is due to the native speakers' reliance on segments as a major phonetic parameter when decoding English (Riney et al., 2005). The more attention given to individual sounds, the better the intelligibility of the speech with the native speakers of English.

4. The case of affricates and similar sequences

Serbian seems to be diversified in the domain of affricates. The Serbian phonological system contains five different affricate articulations, characterized by three places of articulation: the dental /ts/, postalveolars /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, and palatals /tɕ/ and /dʑ/. The English consonantal system officially comprises only two palato-alveolar affricates, namely /tʃ/ and /dʒ/. Unofficially, [tr] and [dr] may also be treated as affricates in English. Wells (2000:15) gives a remark that, in addition to this pair, the clusters [tr] and [dr] are pronounced as affricates in RP and General American, as in *try* and *dream*, and their place of articulation is post-alveolar. On the other hand, Roach (2002:4) holds a slightly different view on the status of affricates, claiming that [ts], [dz], [tr], and [dr] also occur in English, but are not usually regarded as affricates.

The problem lies in the choice of the IPA symbols used for the Serbian postalveolars and the English palato-alveolars. The same may be applied to the English postalveolar sequences compared to the Serbian ones. Spelling may be another tool used for raising the learners' awareness of the differences between the sounds in focus. The spelling conventions for the English dental fricatives are very helpful, but the orthography of /tr/ and /dr/ is not capable of providing such hints.

Furthermore, the Serbian language treats [tr] and [dr] as sequences of two consonants: a dental plosive and an alveolar trill (they are not homorganic), e.g. *trčati* (Eng. *to run*) and *držati* (Eng. *to hold*). Interestingly enough, Serbian EFL learners have difficulty articulating the initial segment of the two clusters when used in English words, but the second element of the cluster does not normally cause problems, except for the very rare cases of the thick Serbian accent in English. Based on the results of the oral exam in English phonetics, only cca. 5% of English majors at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade had a problem articulating the English postalveolar approximant /r/, whereas the English alveolar plosives were troublesome in about 17%, after intensive drilling exercises which lasted for a term.

A plausible explanation may be that the Serbian dental plosives seem to be the closest match for the English alveolar plosives (both the spelling and the transcription indicate the likeness). More often than not, learners start from familiar concepts and use them in the new situations. The Serbian language is not an isolated case in this respect. There are many languages whose speakers tend to use dental [t] plus tapped [r] for English /tr/, making them sound very foreign: Russians, Hungarians, Greeks and others, as well as Serbians / Croats / Bosnians / Montenegrins / Macedonians and Slovenes / Slovaks / Czechs.

5. Concluding remarks

Serbian EFL learners seem to have problems differentiating between some English and Serbian consonants which show a certain resemblance. When it comes to the English postalveolar sequences, one of the most successful solutions would be to treat them separately in an EFL classroom, and not work on them in connection with the articulation of the alveolar plosives. After drawing special attention to /tr/ and /dr/, we may want to call them ‘special’ cases and attach the necessary importance to them. Such a view closely follows the trend Wells (2000) took in his attempts to underline the likeness of all affricate articulations in English.

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