

The Influence of Spanish on the Pronunciation of the English Phonemes /t/ and /d/ in Students of the Eighth
Level of the International Commerce Career at PUCESE

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Abstract

The main goal of this investigation is to analyze the influence of Spanish on the pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ in students of the eighth level of the International Commerce studies at PUCESE during the first semester of 2016. The students from this level have shown some problems when pronouncing two of the most common English phonemes, mentioned above. For this reason, the author decided to carry out this investigation in order to find out the possible causes which are affecting those pronunciations, by comparing the way in which English and Spanish /t/ and /d/ phonemes are realized, identifying the specific problems presented by the students in the pronunciation of them in English, and adapting different techniques that teachers could apply in the classroom in order to improve the pronunciation of them. This thesis first makes a review of previous studies, done in the same field, to be contrasted later. In a second stage, seven students from the eighth level of the International Commerce studies who were registered in the eighth level of General English were observed during two weeks and following that they were interviewed. At the end of those two weeks the results showed that the biggest problem students have when pronouncing those two phonemes is when they are located in the final position of a word, due to the influence of their mother tongue. The author recommends General English teachers to implement an explicit phonetic instruction technique to help students improve this pronunciation problem.

Key words: pronunciation; mother tongue; influence; phonetics

Introduction

In recent years, speaking English in Esmeraldas has become a necessity rather than a luxury, as many may consider it. This is due to the increase of job opportunities in big enterprises related to international businesses, such as the oil refinery, the port or customs duty, which require people to speak English. For this reason, it is very important to educate the future professionals of the province in this field, so as to ensure that they will be very well prepared to face the great world of business, where English is paramount.

Hence, when the English learning process of those future professionals lacks important elements, a problematic situation appears. Currently, this is the case of the students from the eighth level of the International Commerce career at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas (PUCESE), because they have shown inaccurate pronunciation in the English language. One of the reasons of this bad pronunciation can be that students do not have enough awareness of the influence that their mother tongue, Spanish, as spoken by the people from Esmeraldas, which has special peculiarities, is causing on their

proficiency in English pronunciation, especially in those phonemes which are very common in the English language, such as /t/ and /d/.

It all seems, then, that they are dealing with what is called transfer phenomena, which are generally defined as “the incorporation of features of the L1 into the knowledge system of the L2, which the learner is trying to build” (Ellis 1994). This phenomenon is common in second language learning, but the problem here is that nobody is paying attention to improve this fundamental part, which is a marker of English pronunciation. As a consequence, students who finally become professionals will feel uncomfortable in business conversations caused by their bad pronunciation.

The factors of inaccurate pronunciation of the most common English phonemes present in the students of the eighth level of International Commerce are not identified yet; for that reason, this research is focused on finding out which the influence of Spanish on the pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ in the students referred is; what the differences between the English and Spanish /t/ and /d/ are, which the main problems that students have when pronouncing the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ are and what the possible techniques that teachers can apply to improve the pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ are.

Currently, there is an evident problem in English pronunciation at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador in Esmeraldas (PUCESE) by students of the eighth levels of International Commerce. This is may be due to different factors, but the most important one to consider is that students do not have enough awareness of the influence that their mother tongue may have on their English learning process.

The influence of L1 on EFL learners

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to learners who study the English language in their own country, where English is not the dominant one, and as a result of that they do not have too much exposure to it. Also, the only contact learners have with the English language and its culture is most of the time with their teachers at the center of education. For that reason, the teaching process of these students must include lots of practice using English, especially orally; exposure to living English; and reasons to learn English, and motivation to stick to it (Bell, 2011).

It is really important to establish the influence that the first language (L1) has on second language acquisition (SLA/L2). The L1 acquisition, according to Gass & Selinker (2008 cited in Wang, 2014), is the process by which a child learns his or her native language, while SLA/L2 refers to the process of learning

consciously another language after the native language has been learned. Therefore, some linguists such as Chomsky and Krashen (as cited in Klibisz, 2012) coincided in the study of how L2 works but taking as a reference first the L1 system, because it can help learners to improve their language learning ability and classify the language input. Based on that, it is suggested that all learners of second languages subconsciously transfer linguistic properties of their first language to the second language. Thus, the most enduring and prominent phenomenon in L1 transfer is sounds transfer (Wang, 2014).

The importance of teaching pronunciation

Harmer (2000 as cited in Hidayat, 2012) mentions that one of the best ways to help students improve comprehension and intelligibility is through focusing the attention on how sounds are made in the mouth, also the stress, intonation, etc. because it will give students extra information about how the foreign language works.

Apart from that, the way in which a person speaks, gives a lot of information about how that person is, in other words it is the first impression that the audience can get from someone. Many studies have confirmed that it is easier to understand a speaker who has a good pronunciation and some grammatical mistakes than those who have a perfect grammar but a deficient pronunciation. Thus, those kind of speakers can be frustrated because they cannot be understood and, as a result of that, they can feel as a part of the stereotypes known about speakers of foreign languages. The stereotypes suggested that learners with bad pronunciation could be regarded as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge. Once more, there is a strong evidence that it is very important to teach pronunciation in a proper way (AMEP RESEARCH CENTER, 2002)

Contrastive phonology

A contrastive analysis is used as a general approach to make investigation of language in some areas of Applied Linguistics, especially in foreign-language teaching. To develop a contrastive analysis of two languages, the most important aspect to consider is the differences among the structure of those languages, and then that difference can be studied as areas with high level of trouble when dealing with foreign-language learning. This process is known as contrastive analysis hypothesis because it involves the study of how the structure of L1 is affecting the progress of the learner when trying to perform in the L2 (Crystal, 2008).

Contrast between the English and Spanish /t/ and /d/

The goal of this research is to analyze the influence of Spanish on the pronunciation of some English phonemes by contrasting them. Those phonemes are /t/ and /d/, which differ in the place of articulation because

in Latin American Spanish /d/ and /t/ are dental, while in English they are alveolar. It means that Spanish speakers pronounce them with the tip of the tongue against the edges inner surfaces of the upper front teeth. On the other hand, English speakers articulate them with the tip of the tongue on the alveolar ridge just above and behind the upper teeth (Whitley, 2002).

Phonological variants of Spanish dialects in Ecuador

In the case of Ecuador, there are two distinct dialects, one which belongs to the Coast and another to the Highlands. Each of them has some special peculiarities, taking as a reference the pronunciation of some words and body movements (Toscano, 1953 as cited in Carrillo, 2014). Thus, nowadays there are evident changes in pronunciation based on phonetic features. For instance, the phoneme /d/ in intervocalic position is omitted, especially in those places in which afro-descendant population predominates (e.g. Esmeraldas). It means that they say “cocinao” instead of “cocinado”. Then, when the phoneme /d/ and /t/ are in final position they are omitted altogether, especially in rural areas. For example, they say “salú” instead of “salud”. But, in the case of the phoneme /t/ it happens because the Spanish lexicon does not have words ending in /t/ (Lipski, 1994 as cited in Carrillo, 2014).

The most relevant teaching pronunciation methods and techniques

There are different methods that have been used to teach pronunciation. Verdía (2002 as cited in Pérez, 2011) and Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin (1996) described and analyzed the contribution of each of them to the pronunciation field through the time.

Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

It was centered in the systematic use of communicative activities in pronunciation lessons, in which teachers make the students practice grammar structures and vocabulary in simulated real situations in order to prepare them to face and solve problems in the real world (Murcia, 1983 as cited in Mukhtar, 2013). It is currently dominant in language teaching because nowadays learners need to improve their communicative skills, taking into consideration that English is a lingua franca, especially for those who study international business. To make this possible, it is necessary to work with some specific techniques that can contribute to the effectiveness of teaching pronunciation, such as explicit or implicit phonetic instruction.

International Commerce: graduate student profile

The students will be able to manage the skills related to the oral and written expression of the English language as an element which facilitates integration into the labor market. This is the most relevant characteristic for this investigation because students do not show a good performance in English, above all pronunciation, at the end of their studies (PUCESE)

Previous studies

Kissling (2013 & 2014) supported the idea that one of the best ways to teach and improve the pronunciation of foreign language learners is through using an explicit phonetic instruction, which focuses the attention on the pronunciation of individual sounds, manner and place of articulation. According to (Bongaerts et al., 1997; Fullana, 2006 as cited in Kissling 2013) adult learners cannot have a native-like pronunciation if they do not have the opportunity to experience an explicit pronunciation instruction lessons. Moreover, a phonetic pronunciation instruction has demonstrated that it can help to improve the pronunciation of foreign language learners, including English, German and Spanish speakers. All this can be possible if teachers apply this technique in a correct way, it means giving them the appropriate time to discriminate the sounds which contrast among languages. On the other hand, the general language instructions have not proven that they can cause a meaningful impact on pronunciation.

Alwan, You, Kazemzadeh, & Narayanan (2005), described and analyzed some pronunciation variation hypotheses contrasting English and Spanish. The study consisted of monitoring young children, native speakers of Spanish, when speaking in English in order to know the most evident pronunciation problems that they have, even with vowels or consonants. All of this with the aim to know if there are new acoustic phonetic differences among English and Spanish apart from those stated in previous studies. To make this possible, the researchers used a transcription programme based on 4500 words.

At the end, the analysis showed that there are some consonants which have a lot of allophones that do not exist in Spanish and for that reason they are difficult to pronounce for native speakers of Spanish. It means that new pronunciation problems are revealed in this study. As an example of it, there are the alveolar stop consonants /d/ and /t/ which have some pronunciation variants according to the place they appear in a word.

Method

It was a descriptive investigation which had as a goal to observe the characteristics of students from the eighth level of International Commerce when performing in English and describe them, in order to establish a general and meaningful interpretation about this study.

This investigation was possible with the collaboration of 7 students from the eighth level of the International Commerce career. They were registered in the eighth level of General English at PUCESE, during the first semester of 2016. They received five periods of classes each Saturday. Moreover, two General English teachers were part of the process.

The techniques used were observation and an interview. Observations: the students were observed during two weeks, it means 10 hours of classes, in which the researcher was evaluating their pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/, in casual speech and according to some parameters. The parameters were based on the frequency in which students pronounced those phonemes correctly. The students were evaluated with never if they pronounced at a 0% the phonemes correctly, with sometimes if they pronounced from 10-25% the phonemes correctly, with often if they pronounced from 30-50% the phonemes correctly; with generally if they pronounced from 70-90% the phonemes correctly; and with always if they pronounced 100% those phonemes correctly.

Interview: it contained six questions which were designed to make students use, in their answers, words which include the phonemes /t/ and /d/ in different places. The students were recorded after finishing their lessons.

Results

The observation results

Week #1

During that week, students were working with reading passages, questions and answers, listening activities, and repetition of words. When reading, students tried to do their best because they were conscious that the researcher, who has knowledge in the English language, was paying attention to their lesson but even then, the majority of them, (six students) presented a lot of problems when producing /t/ and /d/ in final position because they just did not pronounce them. Only one student pronounced those phonemes correctly, including words such as regular verbs, which were taken into consideration for this research.

Apart from that, (those six students) showed less problems when the phoneme /t/ was placed in initial and middle position in a word because, at least, they pronounced them once in a while. For this reason, they were categorized in “often” and in “generally”, according to the frequency in which they used sound /t/ properly. And again there was an exception because one of the students pronounced accurately the phoneme /t/ in all positions. But, related with the /d/ sound, only one student presented problems because he never produced it correctly when it was placed in the middle position of words.

When the teacher asked questions about the reading text, most of the students, it means six students, were unable to answer the question saying a complete sentence in English, even if the teacher gave them keywords to do it. Thus, the few English words they used, including /t/ and /d/ sounds, were mispronounced because they were focused on the content rather than the pronunciation, which is very important to convey the meaning of sentences.

When the teacher played a recording on an online webpage in which a native speaker, in a casual speech, uttered a sentence, the students had to guess what had been said. Once they guessed the possible answer, they had to write the sentence on the webpage to check if it was correct. This activity confirms that students are not familiarized with the sounds of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/, especially when they are placed in middle and final positions in a word. For that reason it is difficult for them to understand the message.

Finally, the students worked with repetition of words to practice the pronunciation of the new vocabulary. It consisted of repeating words played in a recording and uttered by an English native speaker. In this case, all the students did it well but the problem was when the teacher asked them to use those words in other sentences because they failed in the pronunciation.

Table 1 illustrates the frequency of correct pronunciation of the phonemes during the first week.

Table 1

Frequency of the correct pronunciation during the first week

Frequency																																																
Never							Sometimes							Often							Generally							Always																				
Phonemes																																																
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Final /t/							x X X x X x																												x													
Initial /d/							x x														x x							x x							x													
Middle /d/							x							x x							x x							x														x						
Final /d/							x X X x X							x																												x						
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1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7														

The activities developed during that week were based on a reading, role-reading, filling gaps, interchanging questions and answers about a video, and training for a sketch.

When working with the role-reading, the students had the opportunity to listen to the conversation from a recording, in which English native speakers were interacting. They also listened to the teacher of that week's video, who was from The Netherlands. This time all the students tried to do it better than the previous week, because they already knew that the researcher was paying attention to their pronunciation. Our advantage was that they did not know to what sound this author was focused on. As a result of that, they were still showing serious problems in the pronunciation of the phonemes under study when they placed them at the end of a word. But, it is important to remark that some of them moved from the category "sometimes" to "often", in pronouncing the /t/ and /d/ sounds correctly. It means that, if students could have an explicit phonetic instruction, they could improve the pronunciation of these two very common phonemes in the English language.

As concerns to the gap- filling exercises, most of the students (6), except one student who has a very good English level, failed to do it properly, because they had the idea on their minds but they were unable to write that idea correctly. The same happened when they tried to answer the questions formulated by the teacher about the video, because even if they understood everything, it was too difficult for them to say a complete sentence in English; instead, they preferred to use Spanish.

Finally, they practiced the simulation of a TV show, which consisted of creating their own sketch and using their creativity to perform it. The problem presented here was that students did not have a guide to follow the correct pronunciation of all the words, so they just asked the teacher about those words they considered most important. They focused on content rather than on the way in which they were saying the words, showing, once again, weaknesses in the pronunciation of the /t/ and /d/ phonemes in initial, middle, and final position in a word.

Table 2 shows the frequency of the correct pronunciation during week 2.

Table 2

Frequency of the correct pronunciation during the second week

Frequency	Never							Sometimes							Often							Generally							Always																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																													
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In conclusion, the observations revealed that most of the students pronounce these phonemes correctly when they are located in the initial and middle positions of a word. But, the biggest problem students faced was when the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ were located at the end of a word. Thus, according to the analysis made by the researcher, the incorrect pronunciation of these phonemes is due to three main factors.

First, because of the low English level students have. That is noticeable when students read, write, and speak.

Second, the influence of their mother tongue, because people from Esmeraldas have a particular way of speaking, which has as a main characteristic feature the omission of consonants at the end of words, and it is something you can easily notice when you hear them.

Third, the teachers do not focus the attention on the specific pronunciation of each phoneme when they develop pronunciation exercises in the classroom. They work with repetitions of words as a whole and they do not mind if the final sound is not said properly. But even if the teachers have a native-like pronunciation, students do not see and imitate them as a model to improve the pronunciation of those phonemes, which means that they need more explicit instruction.

The interview results

The questions of the interview were very simple to make students answer them easily; using the vocabulary they already know. Each question was focused on one word in order to realize when students have more problems in pronouncing the English phonemes /t/ and /d/. It is important to mention as well that all the students had the opportunity to prepare themselves for some minutes to answer the questions.

In the first question, “What are the fastest animals of the Savannah?” all the students answered *the lion* and *the tiger*, except for one who also mentioned the zebra. They agreed with the expected answer established by the researcher, which was the word *tiger*; which has the /t/ sound in initial position in the word. In this case they did not show too much problem because most of them did it very well.

The second question was “Count from 12 to 20”. The goal was to check the correct pronunciation of /t/ in the middle position in a word. But there was an inconvenient because only three students were able to say the numbers correctly; the other four pronounced them as if they were 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, and 90. Even if they said sixteen or sixty, most of them (six students) pronounced the phoneme /t/ in the same way they say it in Spanish.

The third question which focused the attention on the /t/ sound in final position in a word was “Where do you look for information to do your homework?” One of the answers of the students matched the one proposed by the researcher: it was *Internet*; the other answer was *book*. In this instance, the six students failed completely when pronouncing this phoneme, because they just omitted the pronunciation of /t/ when it was placed in that part of the word.

Once again, the students showed that for them it is difficult to pronounce the /t/ sound at the end of a word, basically due to the influence of their mother tongue, in which case it is uncommon to find words with that ending.

“What kind of professionals work in a hospital?” was the fourth question to which students answered *doctors* and *nurses*, agreeing in that way with the investigator who expected as an answer the word *doctors*. It focused the attention on the /d/ sound in initial position in a word. In this case just one student failed in the correct pronunciation of this word; the other six students did it properly. It is the researcher’s opinion that they were very much concentrated on pronunciation this time. This result coincided with that one of the /t/ phoneme, and that means that students did not present too much problem when the sounds under study are placed in the initial position of a word.

The fifth question referred to what is celebrated in Ecuador on August 10th, and it is related with the correct pronunciation of the /d/ sound in middle position in a word. The results revealed that from the seven students, only three were able to pronounce the word *independence* correctly, which was the right answer; the other four students were focused on the correct stress of that word, which is, by the way, very similar to Spanish.

The last question, which was “What are the colors of the Ecuadorian flag?” aimed at the pronunciation of the phoneme /d/ in final position. It was the pronunciation of *red* the one expected on this occasion. The result of this showed, again, that for most of the students (6), it is very complicated to produce sounds that are not used in our mother tongue. This is particularly true of the people from Esmeraldas, because there is a tendency to omit the /d/ sound when it is placed at the end of a word.

In conclusion, the interview confirmed the same problems shown in the observations: the faulty pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/, especially when they are found at the end of a word.

Discussion

The first question, which was about the influence of Spanish on the pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ in students of the eighth level of International Commerce at PUCESE, revealed that the biggest influence on the pronunciation of students when saying these phonemes is definitely our mother tongue, which has some peculiarities. The features which influence the English pronunciation are the place of articulation (English alveolars /t/ and /d/ vs. Spanish dentals /t/ and /d/), the linguistic norm from Esmeraldas which has as a main characteristic the omission of consonants at the end of words and that phoneme /d/ is omitted in intervocalic position. Thus, the fossilization of these features, the way in which students have become accustomed to talk during their whole lives, is interfering in their pronunciation of such sounds in English.

Following the same ideas, Kohn (1986 as cited in Alonso, 2002) stated that all the learners of a new language pass through a process called first language transfers in which the learners use all the linguistic information that they already have about their mother tongue when producing second language input. It means that this study is confirming that in most of the cases, the mother tongue will influence upon the acquisition of a new language.

The second question was about the differences between the English and Spanish /t/ and /d/. When comparing two different phonetic systems, many differences arise. To establish a contrast between these two phonemes, it is important to take into consideration some phenomena present in casual speech, such as realization, assimilation, and allophones which can influence the pronunciation of the students, as suggested by Frías (2010) and Al-Jarf (2014). But, taking into consideration that the students from the eighth level of International Commerce are not fluent speakers of English, it is not relevant to focus the attention on those kinds of phenomena when contrasting these phonemes. As a result of that, this research found that the most relevant difference in this context is the place of articulation. The Spanish /t/ and /d/ are dental; it means that we have to put the tip of the tongue against the edges of the inner surfaces of the upper front teeth. The English /t/ and /d/ are alveolar, because they are pronounced with the tip of the tongue on the alveolar ridge just above and behind the upper teeth. This information coincided with the information stated on Whitley's book (2002), who remarked the contrast between some phonemes and, among them, /t/ and /d/.

The third question had to do with the main problems that students have when pronouncing the English phonemes /t/ and /d/. In previous studies such as García (2011), González (2005), Face & Menke (2009),

Nowacka (2012), Alwan, You, Kazemzadeh, & Narayanan (2005), the main problem native speakers of Spanish have when pronouncing the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ was shown and proven to be the mother tongue interference because of the norm used in the region in which they live. Therefore, the performance of the students from the eighth level of the International Commerce studies allowed the researcher to conclude that this pronunciation problem happens because learners substitute English sounds, which do not exist in Spanish, by those they have. Therefore, they tend to speak English in the same way as if they were speaking Spanish and it is due to the acoustic and orthographic similarities of the two languages. The same problems have been presented in students from the International Commerce studies.

Finally, the last question was about the possible techniques that teachers can apply to improve the pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/. Actually, the teachers observed during this research do not use any specific techniques to improve the pronunciation of these two common English phonemes; they simply prefer to use:

- repetition drills, what means the students repeat the word as a whole without any focus on the phonemes in isolation;
- reading aloud,
- role reading,
- role-plays, among others in the same way of some previous investigations.

But, the researcher found out, that those techniques are not enough to solve the pronunciation problems of these phonemes and she considers convenient to look for other techniques, since the traditional ones have proven not to help students significantly to improve the pronunciation of these phonemes.

As a result of that, some interesting options are suggested, such as the practice of the suprasegmentals, which help to give the normal cadency of the language and facilitates pronunciation: rhythm, stress and intonation, using focus word, communicative lessons, and practice with explicit phonetics instruction.

Thus, the investigator agrees with Kissling (2013) who stated that one of the best ways to improve learners' pronunciation is through using an explicit phonetics instruction technique in which the learners work phoneme by phoneme. In Kissling's study, it was proven that all the learners improved their pronunciation after working with this technique.

Conclusions

Most of the International Commerce students have pronunciation problems of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ because they do not have enough knowledge of the place and manner of articulation. Because of that, they cannot contrast the two sounds and so they cannot notice the difference between the way those sounds are pronounced in Spanish and in English.

Most of the International Commerce students have problems when the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ are placed in final position in a word, as a consequence of mother tongue interference.

To improve English pronunciation, teachers use listening and repetition of words as a whole, instead of making emphasis on the pronunciation of each phoneme.

Recommendations

English teachers should:

Include some notions about the contrast between the English and Spanish phonemes /t/ and /d/ in their pronunciation lessons, to make students aware of their mother tongue interference.

Work on the pronunciation of the English phonemes /t/ and /d/ based on the specific characteristics that their mother tongue has.

Include an explicit phonetics instruction as a technique to help students to improve the pronunciation of two of the most common English phonemes, /t/ and /d/, taken into consideration that those already used have not shown very good results.

Proposal

Explicit Phonetics Instruction for International Commerce Studies

Explicit phonetics instruction is a technique in a foreign language classroom, which typically emphasizes the differences between learners' L1 and L2 phonological systems, with regards to phonemic inventories, articulation of analogous phones, grapheme–phoneme correspondences, and phonological processes. In addition, it usually includes perception practice in the form of phoneme discrimination and identification exercises (Kissling, 2013).

Objective: To facilitate the acquisition of two of the most common English phonemes, /t/ and /d/, in order to help students to have appropriate communication in the real world of International Commerce.

How can teachers of General English apply this technique?

Taking into consideration that teachers have to follow the curriculum, a sequence of a book, to deal with a lot of contents, and to work with the four language skills, this technique can be applied as a reinforcement of the pronunciation activities with which they usually work. It means that teachers, instead of just using listening and repetitions of words as a whole, should give more prominence to the differences between English and Spanish phonological systems and the way in which each phoneme is pronounced.

Thus, to ease this process, the teachers can use an online webpage which has audios and pictures of the correct way English and Spanish phonemes should be pronounced. Also, it includes examples of the pronunciations of words in real time. <http://soundsofspeech.uiowa.edu/>

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