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Speaking Errors of Persian and Azeri Turkish Learners in EFL Classrooms: A Comparative Investigation

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Saber Atash Nazarloo
Hossein Navidinia

Department of English Language, University of Birjand
Birjand, Iran

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate and compare the frequency and types of the phonological and syntactic errors made by Persian and Azeri Turkish learners while speaking in EFL classes. To this end, two conversation classes, consisting of EFL students having different native languages (Persian and Azeri Turkish), were selected. During the term, students' authentic conversations and presentations in English language were recorded. The corpus collected from the two classes was then transcribed and analyzed to determine the frequency of phonological and syntactic errors made by the two groups. The results indicated that Azeri Turkish EFL learners made less phonological errors compared with the Persian learners. However, not a noticeable difference in the frequency of errors in the grammatical structures was observed between the two groups. The results were discussed and the implications were made.

Keywords: English language, Persian language, Azeri Turkish language, Error analysis, Speaking errors

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1. Introduction

In today's world, learning English as an International Language has gain more importance. People need to learn this language in order to satisfy their communicative needs. However, learning EFL is not without difficulties and errors. In fact, making mistakes/errors is an integral part of language learning process. Sprat, Pulverness, and Williams (2011) believe that "Making errors plays an important and useful role in language learning because it allows learners to experiment with language and measure their success in

communicating" (p. 62). People all around the world, both native and non-native speakers, regardless of their mother language, make mistakes while speaking.

Errors are so important in learning process, because they are the signs assuring us that learning takes place. These errors may result from different sources; but one can not ignore the effect of the learners' mother tongue on learning EFL. It can be either positive or negative. Knowing the source of learners' errors by the teachers can help them focus more on the differences



of the two languages in order to have a more effective teaching.

Messiha (1985), cited in A. Binturki (2008), stated that “In addition to phonological, lexical and spelling errors, learners also produce pronunciation, rhythm, intonation voice quality errors” (p. 1). All language learners are affected by their mother tongue while learning English, especially in terms of pronunciation, rhythm, intonation and voice quality. Persian and Azeri Turkish learners are not exceptions to this rule. Azeri Turkish and Persian speakers of English do make some special errors in speaking. And some of these differences come from the differences of their mother tongues. The purpose of this study is to make a comparison between the frequency and types of speaking errors made by Azeri Turkish and Persian learners in EFL classes.

2. Review of Literature

Previous studies have addressed the issue of error analysis in EFL classes. Geylanioglu and Dikilitaş (2012) analyzed the pronunciation of certain English words by Turkish English learners. They concluded that Turkish foreign language learners of English have serious difficulties in pronouncing schwa, /θ/ and /ŋ/ sounds. Also, Gan (2012) analyzed the oral problems of ESL teachers in Hong Kong. He concluded that insufficient opportunities to speak English in lectures and tutorials, lack of a focus on language improvement in the curriculum and some other factors contributed to a range of problems that closely related to the socio-cultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts in which individual ESL students found themselves.

Additionally, Kayum (2015) analyzed the errors and corrections in the world of teaching made by foreign language learners in oral communication, and proposed some

new techniques which are usable in English language classes. Also, Kasmani and Jangodazi (2014) analyzed the errors made by Persian (monolingual) and Turkish (bilingual) speaking students of EFL. Both groups were majoring in Translation studies field. They (2014) reported that:

“the learners of the target language deviate from TL rules, so we can say that interference from their mother tongue is not the core cause of the two groups’ errors under the investigation, although there are some differences between the two groups’ errors, they are not statistically significant” (p. 36).

Also, Hjøllum and Mees (2012) worked on the pronunciation of English consonants by Faroese-speaking learners. They (2012) stated that “The most salient distributional feature was rhoticism, which is appropriate for rhotic accents such as General American but might prove distracting for RP (Received Pronunciation) though not affecting intelligibility” (p. 83). Dustmann and Soest (2004) worked on the speaking and fluency of English-speaking immigrants in the United Kingdom, focusing on Lazear’s theory. They ignored the old classification, named it misclassification and introduced a parametric model that allows for scale heterogeneity.

Furthermore, Ting and Chang (2010) examined the grammatical errors of university students in speaking English. The subjects had low proficiency in English. Results showed that while approaching the end of the course, students got more accurate in grammar. Rahmani and Kasmani (2012) analyzed the errors made by Persian and Kurdish students majoring in English translation. They concluded that the main cause of errors is interference from the learners’ mother

tongue, confirming the strong version hypothesis of contrastive analysis.

Beside these studies, Muhamad, et al., (2013) analyzed the errors made in oral presentations by Malaysian students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). They (2013) concluded that “misformation accounted for the majority of the total grammatical errors identified followed by omission and addition and also verb form, word form and article were found to be the three most frequent types of errors made by the students” (p. 19). Pathan, M., Aldersi, Z. & Alsout, E. (2014) analysed the errors made by Libyan Arab EFL learners in speaking. They reported major errors in pronunciation, use of adjectives and grammar. Moreover, Rahuman (2015) examined the errors made by Tamil speaking students of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka in using simple present tense in English. He reported that the most common type of errors made by Tamil speaking students were phonological similarity, omission, incorrect suffixation and substitution.

In addition to the studies done, Jayasundara and Premarathna (2011) conducted a study in order to examine the errors made by first year undergraduates of Uva Wellassa University, in speaking and writing performance. Their study shed light on the way that students internalize the rules of the target language. Their findings were also useful in designing curricula for the better fulfillments of the objectives of second language teaching. Soepriatmadji (2008) investigated grammatical errors as encountered in students' spoken English. He suggested that the most frequent problems encountered by the students were verb phrase, syntax, transfer of training and strategy of language learning and local semantic impact.

Moreover, Karim and Shah (2014) examined the errors made in grammar in the speech transcripts of 15 English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) learners. An analysis of the speech errors and the results of the research indicated that preposition was the most frequent type of grammatical error made by the learners. Also, Thomas (2014) analyzed the English language proficiency of the first year engineering students who had their school education in regional (Tamil) medium. The findings of the study showed that the lack of adequate exposure and practice in the case of L2 learning are the main cause of errors made by the students.

Likewise, Rashid (2015) examined the nature of EFL learners who are learning or acquiring English language as a foreign language, using a multiple-case embedded research design. He reported that “From the analysis and evidence it appears that socio-cultural and cognitive theories have much more relevance than behaviorism to analyzing the language and the acquisition and also more acceptable and applicable in the SLA field” (p. 453). Ma and Tan (2013) examined the errors in Sichuan students' pronunciation and the reason of their errors; and finally they gave some suggestions in order to get rid of Sichuan students' dialect.

Since very few studies have been done to compare the frequency and types of speaking errors made by Azeri Turkish and Persian EFL learners, the present study aims at addressing this issue by focusing on the syntactic and phonological errors made by the learners while speaking.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In order to compare and identify the differences of errors made by English language learners of Azeri Turkish and Persian languages, two upper intermediate classes were chosen. 12 B.A. students (7



boys and 5 girls) majoring in translation studies in University of Birjand were chosen as native Persian speakers and learners of English language, and 14 B.A students (4 boys and 10 girls) majoring in the same field in Higher Education Institute of Rab-e-Rashid were chosen as Azeri Turkish speakers and English learners.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The voice of the both groups were recorded during their conversation course. Both groups were asked to speak about the determined subjects authentically. A corpus was gathered from the voices of these two groups of participants, containing four hours of speaking, two hours for each group. The recorded corpus was then transcribed and analyzed to find the syntactic and phonological errors made by these two groups.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Syntactic Errors

The syntactic differences of the three languages (English, Persian, and Azeri Turkish) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Syntactic differences of the three languages

| | English | Persian | Azeri Turkish |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| Adjective phrase | adj + noun | noun + adj | adj + noun |
| Word order | SVO | SOV | SOV |
| Third person singular 's' | Yes | No | No |
| Adding plural 's' | Yes | Not always | Not always |

The analysis of the corpus revealed that, notwithstanding the syntactic differences of Persian and Turkish languages in adjective phrase and word order, there was not any noticeable error in these areas, as we see in the first and second rows of table 2. It was expected that students would have some errors in this areas because of the inference of their mother tongue, surprisingly, no errors have been observed in these two areas.

In the third row of table 2, we see that students made errors because of the interference, namely negative transfer, of their mother tongue. The reason of making

mistakes in this area is that Azeri Turkish and Persian languages do not add 's' to the third person singular's verb. In other words, there is no difference between second person singular's verb and third person singular's in Azeri Turkish and Persian languages. Persian learners made 11 errors while Azeri Turkish made 13 errors in this area. The difference between these two groups of language learners is not so noticeable. We can refer to 'it help' as Persian learners' error and to 'she try' as Azeri Turkish' ones. The complete list of the syntactic errors is presented in Appendix 1.

The fourth row indicates that both Persian and Azeri Turkish learners made errors on adding plural 's' to the nouns. The reason of not adding plural 's' to some nouns may be the interference of their mother tongue; because in Persian and Azeri Turkish there are some cases that they use single noun instead of plural one. In order to compare two languages and their difference with English language, an example will be helpful:

English: 2 apples

Persian: 2 sib

Azeri Turkish: 2 alma

'Sib' and 'alma' are equivalents for a single 'apple' in Persian and Turkish languages, respectively; and they do not have a plural sign while adding a number to them; while in English language a plural 's' is added while adding a number (more than one). The frequency of errors is presented in table 2, as follows:

Table 2: The frequency of syntactic errors made by Azeri Turkish and Persian learners

| | Persian | Azeri Turkish |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------------|
| Adjective phrase | ---- | ---- |
| Word order | ---- | ---- |
| Third person singular's 's' | 11 | 13 |
| Missing of plural 's' | 8 | 8 |

4.2 Phonological Errors

Based on the data gathered through analyzing the corpus, a comprehensive

phonological comparison of the three languages (English, Persian, and Azeri Turkish) is presented in table 3.

Table 3: Phonological comparison of English, Persian and Azeri Turkish languages

| | English | Persian | Azeri Turkish |
|----------------------|---------|--------------|-----------------------|
| /ð/ | Yes | No | No |
| /θ/ | Yes | No | No |
| /z:/ | Yes | No | No |
| /ə/ | Yes | No | No |
| /dʒ/ | Yes | Yes | With some differences |
| /tʃ/ | Yes | Yes | With some differences |
| /w/ | Yes | No | No |
| /s/ at the beginning | /s/ | /ɪs/ or /əs/ | /ɪs/ or /əs/ |

There is no /ð/ sound in Persian and Azeri Turkish languages. And this makes problem for Persian and Azeri Turkish students to pronounce this sound. Both groups of learners tended to pronounce it as /d/. According to the recorded files and the data gathered, the results indicated that both Azeri and Persian learners made large number of errors in this area. As indicated in table 4, Persian learners had more errors than Azeri Turkish ones. The reason of this difference may be because of the overuse of 'the' and 'that' by Persian learners. This overuse is also visible in Azeri Turkish learners either, but based on the results, the number of this overuse was less than Persian learners.

The /θ/ sound, like /ð/ sound, is problematic for both learners, since they do not have this sound in their native language. Persian learners made 28 errors, while Azeri Turkish learners made 23 errors in this area. An interesting point is that Azeri Turkish speakers pronounced /θ/ sound as /s/, while Persian learners tend to pronounce it as /t/ sound. According to the data, Azeri Turkish speakers pronounced /θ/ 14 times as /s/ and 9 times as /t/, while Persian learners pronounced /θ/ 7 times as /s/ and 21 times as /t/. The reason of this phenomenon may be the fact that the pronunciation of /s/

is easier for Azeri Turkish learners than /t/ and /θ/; while Persian learners prefer pronouncing /t/ rather than /s/ and /θ/. For example 'think' is pronounced as /tɪnk/ by Azeri Turkish learners and as /sɪnk/ by Persian ones. See Appendix 2 for the complete list of the phonological errors.

The other sound which is mostly problematic especially for Persian learners was /z:/. No errors were observed from Azeri Turkish learners; while 4 errors of Persian learners were detected in this area. The reason of this problem in Persian language was that they pronounced /z:/ as /e/. The system of Persian language does not include CCV format, while English and Azeri Turkish language have the mentioned format. This feature of Azeri Turkish languages help the students avoid this error. As an example, Persian learners tend to pronounce 'bird' as /berd/, while Azeri learners have no difficulty in pronouncing it correctly.

One of the most important and challenging areas in speaking and pronunciation is the schwa sound, which is always problematic for most EFL students. Both Azeri Turkish and Persian learners tended to pronounce the words beginning with schwa as /æ/ and /e/, for example they pronounce the first sound of the word appear as /æ/.

Persian learners made 119 errors in the area of schwa, 12 of which were related to the beginning schwas and replacing it with /æ/ and 9 of which pronounced as /e/. And Azeri Turkish learners made 102 errors, 20 of which were related to the beginning schwas and its replacement with /æ/ sound and 6 of which pronounced as /e/. It can be concluded that Azeri Turkish learners pronounced the beginning schwa as /æ/ more than /e/ and Persian learners as /e/ more than /æ/. As an example, 'addition' was pronounced as /ædɪʃn/ mostly by



Persian learners and /edɪfn/ by Azeri Turkish learners. When schwa comes in the middle of the word, they both pronounced it as /e/, /æ/ and /a/. For example they pronounced moral as /moral/, especially Persian learners; because they added a vowel between consonants because of their language system and in order to make the pronunciation easier, while Azeri Turkish learners had fewer errors because of the system of their language which enabled them to pronounce two and even three consonants following each other with no difficulty.

The rest of the errors in schwa area, in which schwa occurred in the middle or at the end of the words, indicated that Persian learners made more errors (98 errors) than Azeri Turkish learners (76 errors); while Azeri Turkish learners made more errors (26 errors) in the words beginning with schwas than Persian ones (21 errors). Furthermore, as far the pronunciation of the /w/ sound is concerned, the findings indicated that the Persian learners made more errors in this area than Azeri Turkish ones (see table 4). It is worth saying that both languages lack /w/ sound and both groups replaced it with /v/ sound.

The other category is the category of 'of', which is mostly pronounced wrongly as the same as 'off' in Persian and Azeri Turkish languages. The reason of this may be the easiness of pronunciation of /f/ sound comparing with /v/. /f/ is voiceless and /v/ is voiced labiodentals fricatives; we can conclude that both Azeri Turkish and Persian speakers used voiceless /f/ rather than voiced /v/. The results showed that Persian learners tendency to pronounce /v/ as /f/ in 'of' is more than Azeri Turkish learners. Persian learners had 30 errors; while Azeri Turkish learners had 18 errors in this category as indicated in the table 4.

EFL learners, especially Iranian learners, added /e/, /i/ or a /ə/ like sound to the beginning of /s/ sound, when it comes at the beginning of the word. The reason of this addition is to make the pronunciation of /s/ sound easier, since they started a word with a vowel rather than a consonant. Persian learners made 16 errors in this area; while Turkish learners made only 5 errors. It is also important to say that 12 out of 16 errors of Persian learners were because of adding /e/ to the beginning of /s/ sound, and the rest of errors were because of adding /i/. While five errors of Azeri Turkish learners were because of adding /i/ sound to the beginning of /s/ sound. For example, 'stay' and 'Spanish' were pronounced as /este/ and /ɪspæniʃ/ by Persian and Azeri Turkish learners, respectively.

The other two categories, namely /dʒ/ and /tʃ/, needs more focus; since Persian and Azeri Turkish learners pronounced these sounds differently. In other words, the pronunciation of /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ sounds in Azeri Turkish language is different with English and Persian languages. As expected, Azeri Turkish learners made 8 and 3 errors in /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ sounds, respectively.

The last category of the table in which the replacement of /æ/ for /e/ in the middle of words was analyzed, showed that Persian speakers replaced /æ/ for /e/ more than Azeri Turkish learners of English, as shown in the table 4. For example Persian learners tend to pronounced 'danger' as /dændʒ(e)r/. The reason behind this kind of error may be the spelling of such words which might be misleading. Persian learners of English made 6 errors, while Azeri Turkish learners of English made only one error. The frequency of all phonological errors were represented in table 4.

Table 4: The frequency of phonological errors made by Azeri Turkish and Persian learners

| | Persian | Azeri Turkish |
|---|---------|---------------|
| /ð/ | 656 | 496 |
| /θ/ | 28 | 23 |
| /z:/ | 4 | ----- |
| Inappropriate use, addition and deletion of /ə/ | 119 | 102 |
| /w/ | 24 | 15 |
| /s/ at the beginning of the words | 16 | 5 |
| 'off' for 'of' | 30 | 18 |
| /dʒ/ | ----- | 8 |
| /tʃ/ | ----- | 3 |
| /æ/ for /e/ in the middle of the words | 6 | 1 |

5. Conclusion

After a close analysis and examination of the corpus, it was indicated that Azeri Turkish learners of English language outperformed Persian ones in phonological errors since they made less errors in this area. However, not a noticeable difference in the frequency of errors in the grammatical structures was observed between these two groups of students.

The interference, negative transfer, is one of the main reasons of inaccurate pronunciations. For example Azeri Turkish learners cannot pronounce /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ accurately, since the two sounds are not available in their mother tongue. Findings of Kasmani and Jangodazi (2014) are not in line with the findings of this paper, in that they believe that mother tongue is not the main reason of errors. The results are in line with those of Rahmani and Kasmani (2012), reporting mother tongue as the main source of errors.

Also, it was concluded that Azeri Turkish students' performance was better than Persian students in phonetics in some areas since they had less errors than Persian students. It implies that more emphasis should be put on this area in both groups, especially Persian students. More attention

should be paid on teaching /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ sounds to Azeri Turkish students.

Since English is a foreign language in Iran, the lack of exposure to English language can also affect the learners speaking proficiency. The findings of this paper are in line with those of Gan (2012) and Thomas (2014), stating that the learners should be exposed to English language in order to have a good proficiency in English language. The opportunities for speaking the target (English) language by the learners should be increased, especially in language classes in which English is being taught as a foreign language.

This paper can be helpful for Iranian teachers in that it can demonstrate the differences between Persian and Azeri Turkish languages. Knowing these differences and similarities can help the EFL teachers focus more on different and problematic parts in order to add to the effectiveness of their instruction. It can also have some implications for materials developers to pay more attention to the parts in which students have more difficulties. It is hoped that other researchers continue this line of research in order to find the sources of the students' errors to help them improve their command of English language speaking skill more efficiently.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Sample list of grammatical errors

| | Persian | Azeri Turkish |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Third person singular 's' | It try It help missing third person singular 's' Missing of third person singular 's' Change missing of third person singular s | It have He want Man do She try He want It help Something happen It have |
| Missing of plural 's' | Missing of plural s | some other language |



| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | and missing plural s More friend for more friends Some advantage and disadvantage missing plural s some disadvantage lacking plural s for different level some advantage | some advantage of there are some disadvantage their profession are other TV program Main difference lack of plural s two part and disadvantage |
|--|---|--|

Appendix 2: Sample list of phonological errors

| | Persian | Azeri Turkish |
|--|---|--|
| /ð/ | The. Another. With. Another. With. Them. Another. Them. That. Another.. The. That. These. The. Another. Another. The. Another. | Although. The . the. They. The. They. The. The, the. There. The. The. The. That. This. The. The. The. The. Other. The. The. Rather. The. |
| /θ/ | Tings for things Everyting Sing for thing | Autor for author Ting for thing ting for thing |
| /ɜ:/ | Earth e worship o nurse e | |
| /w/ | Everyver for everywhere Vatching for watching Vatching for watching | Veak for weak Vorry for worry Hov for how |
| Inappropriate addition and deletion of /ə/ | Another ə Economical o peroblem for problem Forward a Politically adding schwa Censership for censorship | Allows eloz physically ə Appreciated ə. Mathmatical for mathematical. Singel for single Analyze ə |
| Off for of | Off for of | Off for of |
| /dʒ/, /tʃ/ | ---- | Language turki Mutual turkish |

| | | |
|-------------|--|--|
| | | Amateur Turkish |
| /s/ | Estrange for strange Ispend for spend | Istronger for stronger Iscatter for Scatter |
| /æ/ for /e/ | Danger æ | Competitive æ |

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