

Pronunciation difficulties encountered by Sinhala native speakers in learning German as a foreign language

**Neelakshi Chandrasena Premawardhena
Department of Modern Languages
University of Kelaniya, Kelaniya**

Abstract

German is one of the languages much in demand among the foreign languages taught in Sri Lanka. One of the major areas of difficulty in learning German as a foreign language for the Sinhala native speakers is the phonology of German. The fallacy is that English is required to master the language, especially its phonology discourages many a monolingual Sinhala native speaker from learning German.

This paper attempts to analyse phonological systems of Sinhala and German and identify the areas of difficulty for the Sinhala native speaker. The vowel and consonant phonemes, supra-segmental features and the syllabic structure of the two languages will be analysed to discuss the contrastive aspects of the two phonological systems. The difficulties faced by the monolingual and bilingual Sinhala native speakers in grasping the phonology of German are different. Hence this paper concentrates on both groups of speakers. It is also observed that contrary to popular belief, bilingual speakers with a good command of the English language also face difficulties in grasping the phonology of German. Further, it is expected that this paper enlightens the present and future students of German as to how minimal the contrastive aspects of the two phonological systems are.

1. Introduction

German is one of the main foreign languages taught in Sri Lanka. There is much demand for the language at universities, schools and other institutions. However, there is a wrong assumption among many students of languages that a fair knowledge of English is necessary to learn a foreign language, especially a European language. Thus, many a Sinhala native speaker is discouraged by the 'foreign' sounding phonology of the German, assuming that a knowledge of English is an absolute necessity to grasp the language – especially its phonology. The unfamiliar combinations of consonant clusters as well as speech sounds make the students believe that German is much similar to English, not to mention the fact that the roman script is used by both languages in writing. While admitting that German and English are members of one language family – Germanic language family - one should not forget that German, English as well as Sinhala all belong to the Indo-European language family¹. Thus it has been observed that the students overcome most of the pronunciation difficulties encountered in respect of its phonology within a few months of learning the language.

¹ See Karunatilake (1989:167-168, 173)

When considering the Sinhala-native speakers, the monolingual and bilingual speakers have to be discussed separately. Native speakers with both English and Sinhala as their mother tongue as well as those who possess a very good command of English as a second language will be considered as bilinguals in this paper². There are many difficulties encountered by both groups of native speakers at the initial stage of learning German as a foreign language, some of them unique to each group and many common to both. Thus it is indeed a fallacy that knowledge of English makes learning German easier, since the difficulties faced by bilingual speakers are not less than the ones encountered by monolingual speakers.

The aim of this paper is firstly to identify the areas of difficulty for both monolingual and bilingual Sinhala native speakers in grasping the phonology of German and to point out how minimal the contrasts are; secondly, to show that contrary to popular belief, bilingual speakers sometimes encounter even greater difficulties than the monolingual speakers in this respect; thirdly, to make both the teachers and the students of German in Sri Lanka aware of the areas of contrast so that they concentrate more on the particular segmental and supra segmental features and to discuss remedial measures to overcome these difficulties. Finally, this paper attempts to contribute to filling the void of hitherto less explored field of contrastive studies on Sinhala and German. This study confines itself to Standard Spoken German due to the fact that mainly the standard language of German (Hochdeutsch) is taught as a foreign language.

In respect of phonetics and phonology, Premawardhena (1997) has been the only contrastive study of the word phonology of Sinhala and German to date. While this work concentrates mainly on the phonological systems of the two languages and their occurrence, this paper attempts to concentrate more on the pedagogical implications of the contrastive aspects of the two languages and how to minimise the difficulties encountered. Emphasis will be on phonemes as they are more important than allophones in respect of understanding the German language and making it understood when spoken by a Sinhala native speaker.

2. Contrastive aspects of Sinhala and German word phonology

Due to diglossia in Sinhala with a vast difference between the written and the spoken varieties³, the segmental and supra segmental features of only Spoken Sinhala will be discussed here⁴. Since there is no marked difference between the two varieties in German, the Standard Spoken German will be analysed. Further, the pronunciation difficulties encountered by monolingual and bilingual speakers of Sinhala will be discussed separately.

2.1. Segmental features

The contrastive aspects of segmental features will be discussed under vowels and consonants. The diphthongs and consonant clusters are briefly discussed under vowels and consonants respectively.

2 See also Premawardhena (2002a:63; 2003:172)

3 See Gair (1998: 213-263), Premawardhena, (2002a: 63; 2002b: 22-32; 2003: 170) for more on diglossia in Sinhala

4 See Disanayaka, 1991, for further details on sounds and patterns of Spoken Sinhala

2.1.1. Vowels

2.1.1.1. Single vowels

	Sinhala			German		
	front	central	back	front	central	back
high	i i:		u u:	i i: ü ü:		u u:
mid	e e:		o o:	e: œ ø:		ɔ o:
		ə		ɛ ε:	ə	
low	æ æ:					
		a a:			a a:	

Table 1: vowel phonemes of Sinhala and German

By analysing the above table, the pronunciation difficulties encountered by the Sinhala speaking learner in respect of single vowel phonemes can be clearly understood. The following vowel phonemes in spoken German are new to the Sinhala native speakers:

/ü, ü:, œ, ø:, ɛ, ε:, ɔ/

Among these phonemes only /ü, ü:, œ, ø:, ɔ/ cause difficulties in pronunciation because /ɛ/ and /ε:/ can be substituted by /æ/ and /æ:/ occurring in Sinhala as they do not contrast phonologically. The following table presents the difficulties⁵ faced by the monolingual and bilingual speakers in pronouncing the above mentioned vowels, which do not occur in Sinhala and/or English:

Table 2: difficulties encountered by monolingual and bilingual speakers-vowels

	/ü/	/ü:/	/œ/	/ø:/	/ɔ/
monolingual	+	+	+	+	+
bilingual	+	+	+	+	-

⁵ difficulty (+), no difficulty (-)

However, the consonant clusters [fl, lps, msl, tst,] cause difficulties mainly to monolingual speakers and [xt, xsl] to both groups.

Consonant clusters at word final, too, cause difficulties mainly to the monolingual speakers. However, when a cluster of three consonants (CCC) occurs, both groups may encounter difficulties. The speaker may be familiar with the two consonant combinations CC at word final occurring in English and in English loan words. The CCC structure at word final thus causes difficulty to bilingual speakers as well. Hence words which contain CCC structures at word final are pronounced as CC combinations with the final consonant omitted.

eg.: <Arzt> /a:ts/* 'doctor'
 <zuletzt> /sulets/* 'finally'

Thus both groups of learners encounter difficulties in pronouncing the numerous consonant clusters that occur in German although monolingual speakers find most consonant clusters new to them.

2.2. Suprasegmental features

2.2.1. Length

Vowel length is phonemic in both languages and thus does not cause difficulty to the learner in this regard. The following examples can be given from German:

<Mitte>	/mitə/	'middle'	#	<Miete>	/mi:tə/	'rent'
<Kamm>	/kam/	'comb'	#	<kam>		/ka:m/
		v. 'came'				

2.2.2. Juncture

Juncture is also phonemic in Sinhala and German. The following examples can be given from German:

<darf fliegen>	'may fly'	#	<darf liegen>	'may lie down'
<mit Treue>	'with fidelity, faithfulness'	#	<mit Reue>	'with repentance'

2.2.3. Pitch and accent

Pitch is not phonemic in both languages. Regarding word accent, there are a few words in German, which differ in meaning depending on the fall of accent¹⁰. However, most of these words are confined to loanwords and thus do not cause difficulties to the Sinhala native speaker initially. Hence, the Sinhala native speakers do not face difficulties in correctly grasping the suprasegmental features of spoken German as they do with the segmental features.

2.2. Bilingual speakers and interference from English

2.3.

There are a few remarkable mistakes made by the bilingual speakers, which are unique to them and mostly very difficult to correct. This occurs due to the interference of written English. When <z> [ts] or <zt> [tzt] occur, they are pronounced as [z], and the [št] clusters almost always as [st]. Further, the

10 See Meinhold/ Stock (1980: 229-230)

fricative [v] is pronounced as [w]¹¹. These mistakes are done by adult learners only, who get to see how the sentences are presented in print or in written form. Although this occurs due to confusion with the written forms, they are extremely common mistakes made by the bilingual speakers that it is worth mentioning here¹².

3. Remedial measures to minimise pronunciation difficulties

The teachers as well as the students should be made aware of the contrastive aspects of the two phonological systems and common errors made by students. Albeit there are many areas of difficulty faced by the Sinhala speaker at the initial stage when learning German as a foreign language, most of these do not last long. Interestingly, there are methods adopted by the students themselves at the initial stages to pronounce the above mentioned speech sounds as correctly as possible, which can easily be corrected gradually. It has been observed that [ü], for instance, will be substituted by [iyu] and [œ] by [ə:ɔ]. Thus, mastering the pronunciation of German as a native speaker of Sinhala is, in fact, not a difficult task, although many a student is initially discouraged by the extent of the number of new speech sounds they are confronted with at the beginners' stage. Special attention should hence be given to the above mentioned contrastive aspects in the two languages by both the learner and the teacher, especially to the consonant clusters, as correction and familiarisation should come at the initial stage of learning itself.

Furthermore, despite the fact that there are many substitutes to be found in Sinhala phonology for the German speech sounds as in the case of /k/ or /h/ for /x/, or /iyu/ for /ü/, the students should be encouraged at every opportunity to use the correct pronunciation. An idea of how the sounds are produced should be given to the students with the help of diagrams and phonetic exercises¹³ and also an opportunity to familiarise themselves more with authentic dialogues by native German speakers through multimedia teaching aids.

E-learning and E-teaching material should be made available for classroom teaching and self-learning. A large number of comprehensive learning software is currently available for this purpose with all the advantages of the multimedia. The teachers and students should be encouraged to make use of these facilities.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss the pronunciation difficulties faced by Sinhala native speakers in learning German as a foreign language. As depicted above, the difficulties faced by the learner are minimal in respect of its phonology. The segmental features cause more difficulties than the supra segmental features. The consonant clusters of CC and CCC combinations cause difficulties at the initial stage. However, it has been clearly observed that the majority of the learners overcome most of their phonological obstacles after about six months to one year of learning German. Although there may be several phonetic variations, these need not be taken into consideration initially as long as

11 This occurs due to the interference of English in its written form

12 See also Dieling (1992:75-76)

13 software is available for corrective phonetics and could be used in the classroom and as self-learning packages

there is no phonological contrast. It was further discussed that contrary to popular belief, bilingual speakers too, encounter many difficulties at the initial stage of learning and how interference from English creates more obstacles for them than in the case of monolingual speakers. The areas of difficulty faced by the Sinhala native speakers were discussed in 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3. Attention should be paid to guide the students to overcome these with extra emphasis on the particular segmental and supra segmental features. With the advanced E-learning and E-teaching material available for language teaching, this task has certainly become easier today.

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Glossary

al.pal.	alveo-palatal
den.	dental
den. alv. dental	alveolar
glot.	glottal
lab.	labial
pal.	palatal
retro.	retroflex
V/v	vowel
C	consonant
:	long vowel
+	difficulty/ contrast
-	no difficulty/ no contrast