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English Oral Skills: Exploring Critical Contrastive Sounds of Second Language Learners

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Abstract: To speak intelligibly is a goal in speaking to be understood in oral communication with a second language. Mistakes even in simple sounds may deter the correct flow of meanings to the listeners. Thus, this study determined the most critical vowel and consonant contrastive sounds among Grade 7 learners of Bontoc, Mountain Province. A Phonetic Diagnostic Test (PDT) was administered to learners, and then the tests were checked, tabulated, and interpreted. The results were computed using the weighted mean and frequency. The salient findings of the study determined the most critical vowel and consonant contrastive sounds among Bontok learners of L2 which are /æ/ - /ɑ/, /u/ - /ʊ/ and /O/ - /ɔ/, /i/ - /I/, /Θ/ - /t/, /ð/ - /d/, and /tʃ/ -/dʒ/.

INTRODUCTION

To underestimate the importance of pronunciation is a big mistake. If one does not have good pronunciation, one has bad pronunciation, and the consequences of bad pronunciation are tragic. Even if that person uses correct grammar, people may simply not understand what s/he wants to say (Antimmon, 2002). Added to this, the need for humans to share ideas gave rise to language (Villamin et. al. 1994); with language as a medium of communication, learners need to know how to pronounce what they want to say. How they say something is as important as what they say. It means that they must acquire standard correct pronunciation.

There are many as 6,912 different languages spoken in the world (Gordon, 2005; Levey & Polirsky, 2011). One of these many languages is English language; it is the most widespread of languages (Bloomfield, 2005). The Philippines is one of the English-speaking countries. The coming of the Americans to the Philippines paved the way for Filipinos to become educated with benefits like working in government offices, and studying abroad—marking English as a second language. Speaking the English language intelligently is the goal of this study, humans spend most of their time speaking. They engage in human discussion, make presentations, converse with people, and many more. Because they talk with each other of different backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, and speech values, remedial materials in this regard are a must. A person's goal, therefore, is to develop and become intelligible human beings likewise with the use of the spoken English language. Good performance in oral communication indicates that a speaker knows what s/he is talking about and that s/he has a better understanding of information. The ability to read and to speak correctly and impressively is an asset for every child to develop (Torres, 1896).

The effort is generally spent to pronounce English sounds through a contrastive analysis and pronunciation if the ability to pronounce them is a hallmark of an educated man. There are two-fold natures of pronunciation: 1) learning to move the vocal organs, and 2) learning to make a new set of hearing distinctions so that to respond to the sounds being heard (Aquino et al., 1972). Good pronunciation skills are a key element to every English as a Second Language (ESL) learner's ability to communicate in English. However, being able to produce intelligible language is a complicated matter involving the accurate production of phonemes, word stress, connected speech, rhythm, intonation, and chunking amongst other factors (Stead, 2009). The need then to be intelligible is the reason that the intention of improving pronunciation is not to achieve a perfect intonation of the native accent but simply to get the students to pronounce accurately enough to be easily comprehensible to other speakers and listeners. Addressing the pronunciation difficulties of students with the use of the English language is the vital goal of this study as English is one of the languages used in the Philippines' classrooms. In the Philippine Educational Curriculum, the English language is one of the language arts of the core curriculum as others are the Mother Tongue and Filipino languages (Department of Education Order Number 31 of 2012, Republic of the Philippines, Dep. Ed., 2012). Further, the ultimate goals of English classes are communicative competence and multi-literacy. The curriculum develops learners to be proficient in the language arts (K to 12 Curriculum Guide, Dep. Ed, 2013).

For the students, this study will help them familiarize themselves with the specific phonemes of the English language so they can make necessary adjustments in their speech. Thus, this study aims to develop an awareness of contrastive pronunciation skills and varied ways and practices of learning through remediation materials prepared by the researcher.

METHOD

Participants

Participants of the study were Grade 7 with varied first languages (L1) and ages ranging from 11—13. These learners were having pronunciation classes as encapsulated in their English 7 classes mandated by the K12 Curriculum. The English subject uses the K to 12 English Course Curriculum Guide, December 2013. There were 112 Grade 7 learners. Of this number, 40 were chosen as respondents based on their English Subject rating. Learner's rating in the K to 12 curricula is categorized into the following: Advanced (A) with 90% and above, Proficient (P) with 85%-89%, Approaching Proficient (AP) with 80%-84%, Developing (D) with 75%-79%, and Beginning (B) with 74% and below. The learners with Beginning (B), Developing (D), and Approaching Proficient (AP) the past three grading periods were taken as the main subjects of the study of remediation.

Data collection and processing

To establish an assessment of the performance of the learners based on the oral diagnostic test on contrastive sound along vowel and consonant, Phonetic Diagnostic Tests I and II (PDT I and II) with 100 items were constructed. These PD Tests were the major tools for gathering the needed data. The researcher formulated and consolidated sample contrastive sounds on vowels and consonants taken from various resource materials that encompassed the contrastive vowels and consonants which were studied. The items were presented to the researcher's adviser for validity. The score sheets were adapted from Jose M. Mordeno's book Contrastive Pronunciation (1972). Adjustment and revisions were placed with the focus vowel contrastive sounds: /i/ - /I/, /æ/ - /ɑ/, /u/ -/ ʊ/, /O/ - /ɔ/, /Ɛ-e/ and consonant contrastive sounds: /Ɵ/ - /t/, /ɾ/ - /l/, /ð/ - /d/, /ʃ/ - /s/, and /ʧ/ - /ʤ/.

The tests had the following items: PDT I Phonetic Diagnostic Test on Vowels with fifty (50) items covering five (5) contrastive vowel sounds in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA, 2014) with ten (10) pairs of words in each of the contrastive vowel sounds; and PDT II Phonetic Diagnostic Test along Consonants where each five (5) contrastive pairs had 10 sets of contrastive consonant pairs summing to fifty (50) pairs each. The total items for contrastive sounds are one hundred (100).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis

Pre-Test: Oral Phonetic Diagnostic Test: The learners were provided 10 minutes to familiarize themselves and practice with the contrastive sounds and practice them with the help of a dictionary to help them look up the unfamiliar words. Then the subjects were asked to read the material aloud and clearly at a normal speed with brief pauses between lines. Their readings were recorded by a high-quality recording device in a quiet environment.

Analysis of Pre-Test Result: The PDT Test Likert scale. The diagnostic test results were rated 8.0—10.0 being the most difficult sound or Beginning as its description.

Most Critical Contrastive Sounds

The result of the Phonetic Diagnostic test (PDT) on contrastive sounds revealed the pronunciation of the Grade 7 learners on contrastive vowel and consonant sounds.

SKILL	MEAN	RANK
/i-I/	3.995	4
/æ-ɑ/	2.0	1
/u-ʊ/	3.775	3
/O-ɔ/	2.975	2
/ɛ-e/	6.7	5
OVERALL MEAN	3.889	

Figure 1. PDT result presents the ranking of the most critical contrastive vowel sounds.

The first three identified most critical contrastive sounds among the learners are as follow: /æ/ - /ɑ/, /u/ - /ʊ/, /O/ - /ɔ/, and /i/ - /I/; but /ɛ/ - /e/ is rated and observed as critical contrastive vowel sounds.

This implies that out of the five (5) pairs of contrastive vowel sounds, learners had difficulty pronouncing correctly sound variations of the English letters a, u, o, and i when

contrasted together, but not on the letter e. The mean score shows that /æ/ - /ɑ/ has the lowest rate. The result indicates that regardless of the Bontoc variant the learners speak, they showed proficiency on the contrast vowel sounds of /ɛ/ - /e/ but not with the others. The test indicates the less difficulty is on the production and the interchange of vowel sound /ɛ/ and /e/ as most learners were able to note chess—chase as /tʃɛs/ -- /tʃes/ or sent—saint as /sɛnt/ -- /sent/. For the /æ/ sound, it is noted as "beginning" for a reason that the learners usually pronounce it with the simple /ɑ/ sound like "hat" heard as /hOt/, or ma'am as /mɑm/ or even /mOm/, these are common mistakes heard whenever learners greet female teachers in the classroom or even outside.

2. 1. Most Critical Vowel Sounds

2. 2. Most Critical Consonant Sounds

When this sound /æ/ was contrasted with the /ɑ/, learners read the words as: /blɑk/ — /blOck/ for the words black — block; /pɑt/—/pOt/ for the words pat—pot; /rɑk/ — /rOk/on the words rack — rock; /kɑb/—/kOb/ on the words cab — cob; /sɑd/ — /sOd/ for the words sad — sod; /pɑd/ — /pOd/ for words pad—pod; likewise, with /tɑp/ — /tOp/ for the words tap — top. These indicate that learners can say the words with /ɑ/ right but do not know when and what words do carry such sound. As in the oral test cited given, they failed to recognize that the /ɑ/ is present with the grapheme "o" as in top /tɑp/, cop /kɑp/, and cob /cɑb/. However, the /æ/ sound is not recognizable since learners fail to make the sound and are producing the contrastive sound /ɑ/ since the grapheme present in the words is "a". Perez (1965) suggests that the speaker should place the tongue tip behind the lower teeth, let the jaw move down a bit and smile and utter a long-voiced sound. Further, she notes that some learners use only one sound the vernacular /ɑ/ for both the /æ/ - /a/.

As observed during the test, learners usually read the letter "o" as /O/ or even /ɔ/ in words such as clock, block, odd, stock, top, pot, rock, and sod where in fact the letter "o" on the said words should carry the flat /ɑ/ sound as /klɑk/, /blɑk/, /ɑdd/, /stɑk/, /tɑp/, /pɑt/, /rɑk/, /sɑd/ and the letter "a" in the said words should be pronounced as /æ/ as in: black — block, /blæk/—/blɑk/; pat — pot, /pæt/ — /pɑt/, rack — rock, /ræk/ — /rɑk/; cab — cob, /kæb/ — /kɑb/; sad — sod, /sæd/ — /sod/; tap — top, /tæp/— /tɑp/; and pad—pod, /pæd/ —/ pɑd/, stack—stock, /stæk/—/stɑk/; clack—clock, /klæk/ — /klɑk/; and add — odd, /ædd/ —/ɑdd/. Indeed, Johnson (2010) reported that the most common mistake of Filipinos is on this contrastive sound baring the Filipino vernacular /ɑ/ as in /dɑlɑgɑ/ of "dalaga" is certainly the most frequent substitution for the letter "a". Perez (1965) suggests that to avoid this mistake, the speaker must make sure that the tongue arch and jaw are not too low. Further, learners use only one sound, the Filipino vernacular /ɑ/ for both the /æ/ - /ɑ/. Learners forget that for /æ/ tongue arch is slightly higher than for the vernacular /ɑ/.

This result shows the consistency of the cross-linguistic influence claiming that prior language experiences have an impact on the way a language is learned, (Brown, 2000; Wardhaugh, 1970). Further, Lado (1964) added that in learning a second or foreign language, the transfer of L1 phonological features greatly influences second language acquisition.

Bontoks pronunciation has an impact on learners' production of English sounds. So certain pronunciation features of Bontok speakers are closely related to the learning of English.

The observation is noted the same with the contrast sounds of /u/ - /ʊ/ as reflected in the statement; "Did you say he is a fool, or he is full?" Linguists note that indeed, these phonemes are critical sounds like the /i/ - /I/ (Anderson, 1985) as both have the same place of articulation in the mouth yet would differ in the length of the manner of saying it. That the sounds of the letters "i" and "u" have the long and short production reflected in the phonemes /i/ and /I/, and /u/ and /ʊ/. As for the letter "u", learners likely would interchange pool—pull as /pʊl--pul/; boot — book as /bʊt — buk/; mood — wood as /mʊd — wud/; and loot —look as /lʊt/ — /luk/. Where the words cited should be pronounced as follows: pool — pull, /pul--pʊl/; boot — book, /but/ -- /bʊk/, mood — wood, /mud/ -- /wʊd/; and loot — look, /lut--lʊk/.

Just like with the Bontoks production with the name of the place itself as with the /u/ and /ʊ/ for Bontoc heard as /bʊntuk/, bʊntOk/ or even /bOnOk/ that should sound as /bɔntOk/. This finding is closely related with the third contrastive pair /O/ - /ɔ/ "developing" as heard on the words hole—hall as /hOl/ - /hɔl/. Learners would usually say the letter "o" with full /O/ sound rather than the half /ɔ/ sound like /hɔl/ — /hOl/. Indeed, the test shows that learners likely say: so—saw as /sɔ/ - /sO/ or even both as /sO/ — /sO/, know—gnaw as /nɔ/ - /nO/ or even /nO/ - /nO/, low—law as / lɔ/ - /lO/, bold — bald as /bɔld/ — /bOld/; and stole—stall as /stɔl/ — /stOl/ or both like /stOl/ — /stOl, loud — laud as /lɔd/ - /lOd/, row — raw as /rOw/ - /rOw/ or many still like /rɔw/ — /rOw/. This finding is similar with the assertion of Perez (1965) on her Regional Drills that learners from Ilocos, Bicol, Visayas, and Mindanao provinces have the tendency, in certain words to substitute: /u/ and /ʊ/ for /O/ as when show is pronounced as shoe, poll as pool, hose as whose, scope as scoop; and another on /O/ for /u/ and /ʊ/ as when soup is pronounced as soap, route as wrote, whom as home, do as doe.

Learners would substitute words when contrasting sounds are put together. The tendency to interchange and/ or substitute is likely observed from the learners resulting in their difficulty in producing the sound right which means the alteration of the meaning of the word. A single phoneme could change entirely the intent. Such statements that could picture further are: "Cats and cots are both four-legged. Which are you referring to?" "The soldier is loaded/ lauded."

Understanding the learner's context shows the effect of the cross-linguistic influence claiming that prior language experiences have an impact on the way a language is learned, (Brown, 2000; Wardhaugh, 1970). Further, Lado (1964) added that in the process of learning a second or foreign language, the transfer of first language phonological features greatly influences the second language. Bontok pronunciation has an impact on learners' production of English sounds. So certain pronunciation features of Bontok speakers are closely related to learning the English language.

Further, it is a part of disciplining the mouth to guide in pronouncing contrasting the /Ɛ/ to /I/ and /O/ to /ʊ/ (Ortograpiyang Pambansa, 2014 by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino). Further, Johnson (2010) reported that in Filipino, each consonant is pronounced with a /a/ like "lack", "bah," and "gah" and that vowels are fully pronounced. More so, a

vowel letter can represent different vowel sounds like law /lɔ/, tax /tæks/, and all /ɔl/. The same vowel sound is often represented by different letters in writing: /u/ soup as /sup/, truth as /truϴ/, lose as /lus/, shoe as /ʃu/, bruise as /bruz/ Hence, respondents may have difficulty of distinguishing one (monophthongs) from the others more especially with the top difficulties that are in with the cited vowel letters of "a", "o", "u", "i".

If learners are aware of the inconsistency of their first language with English as their Second Language, then it would lead them to adjust to such variations. Critical awareness would pave the ways to self-correct and do adjustments in speaking. Despite awareness, consistency is difficult to follow with the production of the varied sounds of the letter "a" and "e" combinations. Linguistically, the combination of the sounds forms diphthongs. A sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable, in which the sound begins as one vowel and moves toward another (as in coin, loud, and side); a digraph representing the sound of a diphthong or single vowel (as in feat); a compound vowel character; a ligature (such as æ). These are sounds combined in a continuous motion.

The relationship of pronunciation to spelling in Filipino requires a rule that a word is pronounced as it is spelled and spelled as it is pronounced. In Filipino, there are no silent letters unlike in English or Spanish (Edroza & Del Rosario, 1967). The alphabet of Filipinos indeed is composed of twenty (20) letters in all. Five of these are vowels: A, E, I, O, U. Fifteen of these are consonants: B, K, D, G, H, L, M, N, NG, P, R, Q, R, S, T, W, Y. The names of each letter are: /a/, /ba/, /ka/, /da/, /e/, /ga/, /ha/, /i/, /la/, /ma/, /na/, /nga/, /o/, /pa/, /ra/, /sa/, /ta/, /u/ /wa/, /ya/. These are the fundamentals of Balarilang Filipino, yet updates were raised by the Komisyonsa Wikang Pambansa on Ortograpiyang Pambansa (2014) that there were already twenty-eight (28) letters of Filipino Alphabets corresponding each with a sound. Each letter is read with the English sound except for ñ.

As a result, knowledge of the tongue positions in sound production is necessary. In studying the individual vowels, one should always refer to the Vietor triangle to be reminded of the relative positions of the tongue in pronouncing vowels (Perez, 1965). This procedure is particularly helpful in correcting regional tendencies or the first language transfer, as when the learners substitute "shoe" for "show", "soap" for soup, "thee" for "thy".

In corroboration with other studies, Gegway (2005) as cited by Balaan (2013) that one of the most noted errors in the substitution of /ɔ/, /aʊ/, and /u/ vowel phonemes instead of /ɔ/ wherein there are lot of sounds that can be substituted to /ɔ/, the more errors are committed in that specific vowel sound. Supplementary, Padsoyan (2014) found that commonly mispronounced vowels are /æ/, forward vowel /i/, and /ɔ/.

On consonants. Table 5 presents the PDT result of the identified most critical contrastive consonant sounds.

SKILLS	MEAN	RANK
/ϴ-t/	1.056	1
/r-l/	5.99	5
/ð-d/	3.23	2
/ʃ-s/	4.39	4

/tʃ-dʒ/	3.99	3
OVERALL MEAN	3.73	

Figure 2. PDT indicates the most critical contrastive consonant sounds.

The top three most critical contrastive consonant sounds are as follows respectively: /Θ/ - /t/ and /ð/ - /d/, and /tʃ/ - /dʒ/. The figure explains further that when it comes to consonant sounds learners are having difficulty with the inconsistencies of producing the sounds: /Θ/ - /t/, /ð/ - /d/, /tʃ/ - /dʒ/, /ʃ/ - /s/, and /r/ -/l/. Contrasting words would make the learners have difficult pronouncing words which carry the correct sounds as heard in their oral test like thin—tin /ΘIn/ — /tIn/ heard as both /tIn/ or even /ten/; also, with though—dough /ðO/ —/dO/ as both said as /dO/; chump — jump /tʃʊmp/ -- /dʒʊmp/ as both /dʒʊmp/ and chin—gin /tʃIn/ - /dʒIn/ heard as /tʃIn/ - /gIn/ or even both as /tʃin/.

Observations and further medical assessments shown in the Medical Dental Records (MDR) show that almost all learners do not have a physical disability (hearing impairment, or deafness) as a barrier to the recognition and production of sounds. This implies that learners do not have any physical barriers to mispronouncing contrastive sounds. They certainly lack exposure and modeling as to how to say words properly. Overgeneralization, as adopted in the Filipino and vernaculars, was observed with the learners' oral output that how a word is spelled implies the pronunciation of the word itself, but this does not apply to the English language.

This result is backed up by report of Johnson, E. (2010) that the top pronunciation difficulties are on: /Θ/ - /t/ and /ð/ - /d/, /tʃ/ - /dʒ/ are indeed true to most of the Filipino learners learning the English as a second language. Menyuk (1968) and Schmidt (1977) claim, too, that dental fricatives /w/ and /t/ are the last sounds that native speakers grasp in their language development and are most frequently found to be substituted by other sounds. This probably explains why non-native speakers find problems in pronouncing the two sounds.

Moreover, in corroboration with Padsoyan's study that one of the common mispronounced consonant sounds is /Θ/. Further, Atas (2003) noted that difficulties are considered the critical consonant sounds in contrast with others: /b/, /v/. /f/, /p/, /k/, /tʃ/, /S/, /z/, /Z/, /p/.

The common sounds are to be produced with the letter "t". The same with the initial consonant sounds reveals that learners make approximations to produce sounds based on the native language; it is a major component of a "foreign" accent. Observation from the learners' oral test on the letter "t" revealed that they don't release the breath stream and if they don't keep the tongue firmly pressed against the edge of the upper front teeth, the sound produced will be the vernacular. They do not breathe out with friction –sound like Perez (1965) claimed. Another, finding shows that learners tend to substitute the Filipino vernacular "t" /Θ/ (voiceless th) or our vernacular "d" for /ð/ (voiced th). Voicing out the /t/ is done by placing the tip of the tongue behind the teeth and holding the breath and pushing out air to force the sound out; hence, forming the /d/ sound. The/d/ is just like

/t/ in place of articulation but is just voiced, making it different from /t/. Indeed, it was claimed by Posey (2004) that the /t/ is often pronounced like /d/ because they are formed the same way. The study explained further that this way of pronouncing /t/ and /d/ is common to both Spanish and Filipinos. Thus, there is a vibration for /d/ but, none for /t/ for correct pronunciation.

The Filipino language phonetic alphabets do not contain the dental fricatives /ϴ/ and /ð/ and so cannot be acquired in infancy. At maturation, trying to learn them becomes difficult as there are immediate alternatives to these sounds in the Filipino language as may only /t/. Some of the consequences of bilingualism or language contact, therefore, come into play and these are interference, simplification, and substitution at the phonological level. What the Filipino speaker of English does is simplify these sounds by substituting the non-existing sounds with the closest in his language. Thus, he: (a.) substitutes /ϴ/ with /t/ which exists in both languages and (b.) substitutes /ð/ with /d/ which exists in both languages.

Aspects of spoken language show strong similarities to the types of patterns for writing. Some differences in units matter because replacing one with another will cause a different meaning to be conveyed in the language in question: replace the initial sound /k/ in the call, and it will be a tall and entirely different English word. Corresponding English speakers perceive /k/ and /t/ as entirely separate sounds, and find them rather easy to establish (McMahort, 2002). English consonants may differ significantly in voicing as in the case of cognates. Cognates are of the same or similar nature generally alike. Cognates are phonemes having the same manner of articulation but only different in voicing (Atas, 2013). When sounding the words face and vase the difference is felt at the larynx, thus, /f/ and /v/ are cognates.

Since these substitutes have close resemblances, especially with their places of articulation very close to each other such as /ϴ/- dental and /t/- alveolar and /ð/- dental and /d/- alveolar, substitution becomes easy and this engenders mutual intelligibility, thus making it easier for Filipino speakers of English as a second language to achieve some level of intelligibility which Tiffen (1974) asserts. The production problem of dental fricatives does not result in the problem of perception by either second language English users or native speakers when they listen. Even when there seems to be an obvious case of wrong articulation, the linguistic environment of the mispronounced sound gives adequate context cues to the intended meaning. To this category of non-native speakers, either the correct pronunciation or the wrong one is perceived correctly, especially when heard in the right linguistic environment. Although such mispronunciation may sometimes affect international intelligibility; this problem can be solved by the context of usage and what Banjo (1996) calls international interaction.

As English increasingly becomes the language used for international communication, it is vital that speakers of English, whether they are native or non-native speakers, can exchange meaning effectively. In fact, in recent discussions of English-language teaching, the unrealistic idea that learners should sound and speak like native speakers is fast disappearing. It is more important that speakers of English can achieve: (Burns, A. & Claire, S., 2003) intelligibility (the speaker produces sound patterns that are recognizable as English),

comprehensibility (the listener can understand the meaning of what is said), and interpretability (the listener can understand the purpose of what is said).

Indeed, clear pronunciation is essential in spoken communication. Even where learners produce minor inaccuracies in vocabulary and grammar, they are more likely to communicate effectively when they have good pronunciation and intonation.

Learners should raise their awareness about English sounds and try their best to improve their English pronunciation to speak English naturally and fluently (Atas, 2012). Since English learners whose first languages are Asian language tend to show phonetic inaccuracies in their learning of English as a second or foreign language (Flege, 1989; Flege & Davidian, 1985; Pittam & Ingram, 1992; Tarone, 1980; Wang, 1983; Yang, 1996, as cited in Yang 2001), the need to address such challenge in pronunciation is important.

Consequently, the sound system of the Bontok language and its variants are not the same as that of English. Thus, inevitable influences on the production of vowel and consonant sounds of the words among learners when uttering or reading English words and sentences are expected. Understanding the differences of the Bontoc phonemes from the speech sounds in English is necessary for the internalization of language learning opportunities for the production of the distinct properties of both languages. Pronunciations on contrastive vowels and consonant phonemes help the learners recognize the kind of English used and spoken by native speakers in lectures, interviews, teachings, business situations, and general daily conversations; thus, leading to the enhancement of comprehension skills. This is what the remediation materials provide.

CONCLUSION

The English as a second language learners had the most difficulties along contrastive vowels and consonants on rounded vowels /O/, /ɔ/, /u/, /ʊ/ when contrasted together and fricative consonants /ð/, /Θ/, as contrasted in /Θ/ - /t/, /ð - d/ which is more mainly adapted from their first languages.

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