Phonological Analysis of English Language on Selected Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The English language has been marked as an embodiment of inconsistencies and this is obvious that special attention needs to be given to it. The need is especially itching when one considers that by virtue of it being a prestigious and an international language, students, specifically, English language students, encounter many problems now and then; and despite the fact that pronunciation is taught in courses like Spoken English, Phonetics and Phonology, there are still flaws in students' pronunciation as they battle with confusion caused by such inconsistencies. As a result, this study anchored on the factors that hinder students' competence in oral pronunciation. Specifically, it studied the impact of inconsistency of English sound-spelling system on students learning English as their second language in the Department of English Language and Literature, UNIZIK, Awka. However, its relevance will bring to bear some unnoticed phonological treasures embedded in the English language which in turn, helps in speaking the language without a foreign accent. In order to achieve the set purposes, the data were collected through the transcription of English words

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which were administered to forty (40) students from the mentioned institution through random sample method and were analysed within the scope of Error Analysis Theory which was propounded by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the late of 1970s. It was revealed that the inconsistency of sound-spelling system militate against students' proficiency in oral English communication.

Keywords: phonological interference, second language learning, sound-spelling system, competence and performance.

Introduction

The English language in Nigeria and other African countries is the second language (L_2) to the people which a person learns under a formalized setting (Chukwu, 2010) and its implication is felt mostly in spoken form where we encounter interferences either from the L_1 or the target language itself. According to Lado (2011), the achievement of the learning of a second language is greatly dependent on the ability of the learners to use the languages flexibly, sensitively, accurately and appropriately. He explains that nobody can learn a foreign language properly without immersing himself in its culture, since the two are inextricably linked. Therefore, this phonological interference distorts communication which is essential to man; and in spoken English, pronunciation is the most important thing that students have to master in order to communicate appropriately and fluently, otherwise, people cannot receive our message. Meanwhile, the English alphabet has 26 letters while the English sounds are 44 which indicate that the alphabet is overburdened. Therefore, out of the 26 letters of alphabet, there are only 5 vowels which are 'a, e, i, o, and u'. These vowels are poor

reflection of the 20 vowel sounds in English sound inventory, so, variations and combinations of these vowels are used to represent the sound in spoken English.

Considering the problems of sound inconsistencies encountered by L2 learners, English pronunciation has more complicated rules than many other spelling systems for language written in alphabetic script. The reason being that the orthography of old English which used the runic alphabet and was largely phonemic, was swept away by Norman Conquest and the English itself was eclipsed by Norman French for three centuries, eventually, emerging with lack of consistencies. Commenting on these inconsistencies, (Pink and Thomas 1994) in Umera-Okeke,(2008)attribute them to historical reasons which border on the commencement of printing in English in the fifteen century. They state that the modern English spelling was fixed in the fifteen century and so, it represents the spelling of that century. This leads to the obvious reasons why there are non-correspondence between the written word and the spoken word. Another reason for the chaotic English spelling was attributed to the French scribes who as early as in the fifteenth century had introduced symbols from their language to represent English sounds. This explains the use 'c' for 's' in 'city'/sɪti:/ mice /maɪs/ and others; 'gu' for / g/ in guest /gest/, guess /ges/, and so on; and 'ou' or 'ow 'for diphthongal sound in house /haɪ s/, cow /kaɪ / and so on. Their last reason was the attempts to make the spelling of words retain their etymology. The Norman French words "dette and doute" for instance, retained their spellings when they were first introduced. But they were latter written 'debt and doubt' in order to show their connection with Latin "debitum and dubitum'. The /b/ sound has never

pronounced. All these are the reasons why the inherent factor which is embedded in this target language (English) deters students from using the English language effectively. This goes in line with Okeke and Chukwu (2013) assertion that it is difficult for learners to learn a second language due to a number of handicaps.

Also, the correspondence between the orthography (the system of spelling in a language) and phonology (the speech sound of a particular language) enable students to predict the pronunciation of words from the spelling, for instance: market /ma:kɪt/, bucket /bɪ kɪt/, prophet /prɪ fɪt/ wallet /wɪ lɪt/, pocket /pɪ kɪt/ and so on. The letter 'e' is pronounced as /e/ by the students instead of /ɪ/, due to their inability to conceive the difference between 'e' as a letter and as a sound. Thus, unlike many other languages, the pronunciation of English word does not correspond in a regular way to its spelling. In this continuum, O'Connor (2003) confirms the difficulty in knowing the exact sounds the letter stands for or represent in a certain word. This goes in line with Lado's (2011, p. 24) assertions that '" the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult'.

Therefore, the English language has been marked as an embodiment of inconsistencies and this is obvious that special attention needs to be given to it. The need is especially itching when one considers that by virtue of it being a prestigious and an international language, students, specifically, English language students, encounter many problems now and then by being incompetent in oral English communication which to a large extent, disorganises and weakens their confidence both in speaking and writing; thus, English language is an

inconsistent language system and consequently, dicey and very tricky. According to Davenport and Hannahs (2010), when asked most English speakers how many vowel sounds the English has, the answer will be five, that is, 'a, e, ɪ, o, u' unless the person asked has taken a course in phonetics and phonology. This is actually what prompted the researcher to choose the English language students for this study and the study in turn, acts as an inducement to students and helps them adjust and develop interest in phonetics and phonology in order to enhance their phonological performance. In view of this, the study examines the extent to which the inherent factors have interfered with English language and equally determines the extent to which this distortion has affected the students' performance in oral English.

Review of Related Scholarship

It is established that Nigerians are not native speakers of the English language and in that case, learning it is not as natural as it is to the native speakers who have become familiar with the components of English in the natural process of growing up. English language according to Fasanmi (2011) has occupied a prominent position in Nigeria because of its second language and official status. It is being used in official functions and a pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions and also studied as a course. Oral English is the spoken form of the English language. However, learning it is essentially a deliberate effort at developing a command and control of the different components of the language: its phonology (the sound system), its morphology (the pattern and parts of words) and its syntax (the patterns of phrases and sentences). Hence, it is quite difficult for adults to attain a high level of

competence in their oral English because they already have a language in their linguistic repertoire.

Quite a comprehensive research has been going on to innovate strategies in developing the oral English competence among learners of English as a second language. Problems of the second language learners have continued to be investigated and as such, Chomsky had come out with issues of competence and performance. Competence is the intuitive judgment and knowledge of the native speaker of his language. Also, Elugbe (2000, p.8) sees performance in the light of proficiency which a nonnative speaker does not have in full. Many factors have been discovered to be responsible for this situation. Equally, it has been put into perspective that undergraduates especially, English language students are near competent in their writing skills when compared to their speaking skills (performance).

Keeping in mind the observation, many scholars/researchers are working on how to improve oral English competence and fluency of ESL learners. Sethi et al. (2010) affirm that in English, there is no single form of pronunciation that could be regarded as "the correct pronunciation". The reason is that the English language spoken widely has developed a good many spoken forms, which are called 'accents'. In this view, the accent that belongs to the part of the country one comes from or lives in becomes a barrier that hinders one from speaking proficiently. This indicates that the ability of speaking embodies the correctness of pronunciation, and in turn, intelligibility is regarded as an essential criterion to judge the suitability of a given pronunciation.

However, students with no knowledge of spoken English will be judged as being incompetent or uneducated when it comes to good

pronunciation in communication. Thus, we should consider the fact that speech is one of the prominent forms so far as language is concerned. It is the most essential skill and a purposeful human activity; not just a movement or energy or noise, but a systematically organized activity, intended - under circumstances - to convey meaning.

Theoretical Framework
Error Analysis Theory

The study of language learning remains incomplete without an in-depth analysis of the errors that creep into its usage. This study anchors on Error Analysis Theory which was propounded by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the late of 1970s and has become a very popular approach for describing L_2 learner's errors. Corder first indicated it in his article "The Significance of Learner Errors" in 1967 where he mentioned the interesting part of L_2 errors that reflect some of the underlying linguistic rules. However, this theory came due to the severe criticism of Contrastive Analysis (CA), thus; a shift of focus from potential errors to the actual committed ones is needed.

Error Analysis (henceforth, EA) is the process of determining the incident, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language use and it attributed L_2 learners' errors to two main different sources: Interlingual (MT) and Intralingual interference (the effect of the target language itself). This error occurs due to the result of language transfer which is probably caused by the learner's Mother Tongue (MT). Previous studies have attributed a huge number of L_2 learners' errors to the influence of their L_1 as Al-khresheh (2016) comments.

Given that interlingual errors are caused by interference from the

learner's L_1, there are still some errors whose origins were omitted from the structures of the learner's L_1. Al-Tamimi (2006) asserts that the errors that do not reflect the structure of the learner's MT are caused by intralingual interference from the TL itself which is one of the major factors that affect the process of L_2 acquisition.. Corder (1967) affirms that some L_2 learners' errors can be regarded as intralingual errors because they might result from partial learning of the TL. Moreover, intralingual errors as Lim (2010) observes have been found to be non-interlingual in nature as they are not directly caused by the differences between their L_1 and L_2.

By and large, being a theory of second language acquisition (SLA) or learning, there is a good reason to agree that Error Analysis Theory is more appropriate in analyzing phonological problems. Not only because the goal of EA as Al-Khresheh (2016) affirms is to describe and explain learner's errors in the process of acquisition of L_2, but its use, especially in this work, objectively accounts for the detailed analysis of phonological performance of students of English and effectively pinpoint their errors and causes.

Methodology

Descriptive research design was chosen not to make any judgment but only to describe the portrait of English language students' oral English performance. It equally describes how they learn their pronunciation and the challenges they face in oral English.

Population of the Study

The total population is all students of the English language in Nnamdi

Azikiwe University, Awka and they were chosen because they have taken a course on phonological areas, as such, expected to be proficient in their oral English communication.

Sampling Method

The sampling method adopted in this study is random sampling. Using this method, the tool was tried out on a sample of forty (40) English language students drawn from three and four hundred level of the institution, that is, twenty (20) girls and twenty (20) boys. Meanwhile, the students were picked randomly which enabled the researcher to take and generalize the responses obtained from the selected students.

Data Collection

For the researcher to identify errors from the students, twenty (20) words were written on a piece of paper and each has a target sound (vowels and consonants). The papers were given to the students and each student is expected to transcribe the words correctly with the correct sounds. Thus, transcription of English words became the tool used in this study. This process took about two hours to be completed.

Let us examine the table below:

Words	BSE	TS	NS	NCT	%	NIT	%
Piquant	/pi:k?nt/	/i:/	40	19	47.5	21	52.5
Hiccup	/h'k?p/	/?/	40	9	22.5	31	77.5
Quasi	/kwc?za?/	/c?/	40	12	30	28	70
Bourgeois	/b???wa:/	/??/	40	0	0	40	0
Assuage	/?swe??/	/? /	40	17	42.5	23	57.5

Otiose	/??t???s/	/??/	40	14	35	26	65
Ado	/?du:/	/?/	40	11	27.5	29	72.5
Weather	/weð?/	/ð/	40	32	80	8	20
Wednesday	/wenzde?/	Silent 'd'	40	18	45	22	55
Vitiate	/v??ê?/	/?/	40	17	42.5	23	57.5
Bosom	/b?z?m/	/?/	40	11	27.5	29	72.5
Wallet	/w?l?/	/?/	40	32	80	8	20
Church	/?з:?/	/?/	40	10	25	30	75
Theatre	/??ʔ?/	/?/	40	13	32.5	27	67.5
World	/wз:ld/	/з/	40	22	55	18	45
Handkerchief	/h?? k???f/	Silent 'd'	40	3	7.5	37	92.5
Christmas	/krism?s/	Silent 't'	40	16	40	24	60
Debtor	/det?/	Silent 'b'	40	17	42.5	23	57.5
Corps	/k?:/	Silent 'ps'	40	5	12.5	35	87.5
Plumber	/pl?m?/	Silent 'b'	40	18	45	22	55

Analysis of data

The statistics used in analysing this study is very simple and clear. Percentages from the collected data were tabulated and analysed descriptively. Samples of the English transcriptions were counted and calculated to see the total number of the correct and incorrect answers given by the (40) subjects in all items of the test. The percentage was worked as follows:

For instance, in the first word 'piquant', the correct transcription is /pi:kɪ nt/, while the target sound is /i:/. The numbers of students who transcribed this word were 40. The numbers of students with correct transcription were 19; and the numbers of students with incorrect transcription were 21. Hence, to calculate the percentage % of the students with the correct transcription of 'piquant', the following process was followed:

No. of students with correct transcription $\frac{19}{40} \times \frac{100}{1} = 47.5$

The above calculation indicates that only 47.5% among 40 students were able to get the correct transcription. On the other hand, to calculate the percentage of students with incorrect transcription, the following process was applied

No. of students with incorrect transcription $\frac{21}{40} \times \frac{100}{1} = 52.5$

The above statistics indicates that 52.5% of the students were not able to transcribe correctly.

Therefore, the whole data collected were calculated using the same process. Meanwhile, there are abbreviations used in the tables which are: BSE- British Standard English, TS- Target sound, NS- Number of students, NCT- Number of correct transcription, NIT- Number of incorrect transcription, %- percentage.

Frequency table:

Total no. of words	Total no. of respondents	Frequency of the total no. of words	Total no. of correct responses	Total no. of deviant responses	%	% of correct response	% of deviant response
20	40	800	296	504	100	37%	63%

From the table above, 20 words were transcribed by 40 students which give a total of 800 words, only 296 words were correctly transcribed out of 800 total words representing 37% of the total words while, the incorrect/deviant transcription were 504 out of 800 words representing 63% of the total number of words. The analysis indicates that a great number of the English language students in Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Awka do not have mastery of the English sound system which will enable them engage in the perfect transcription of any word.

Discussion of findings

The findings reveal the errors committed by undergraduate students of English language in oral English communication, which, when observe critically from the table above, shows fossilization as one of the reasons behind these errors and examples of such are;

Words	BSE	Fossilized version
Hiccup	/hɪkɪ p/	/hikup/
Weather	/weðɪ /	/weda/
Wednesday	/wenzdeɪ/	/wenezde/
Wallet	/wɪ lɪt/	/walet/

Church	/tɪɪ ;tɪ/	/tɪɪ ;tɪ/
Theatre	/ɪ ɪɪ tɪ /	/tietæ/
World	/wɪ ;ld/	/wɪ ;ld/
Handkerchief	/hæ kɪ tɪɪf/	/hændkætɪɪf/
Christmas	/krɪsmɪ s/	/kristmæs/
Debtor	/detɪ /	/debtɪ /
Corps	/kɪ ;/	/kɪ ;p/

Fossilization is a process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot easily be corrected. In an essence, mother tongue interference is obvious here, that is, when one's tongue is stuck to one's mother tongue, the internalization and learning of a second language will be a difficult task. This indicates that errors do take time to correct but a fossilized error may never be corrected unless the learner sees a reason or wants to do so especially, when it hinders communication

.

Another reason for this erroneous communication is the quality of teachers and how students internalize what they learnt. This proffers that one cannot give what one does not have; so, if the teachers are not qualified enough, the students will end up internalizing what it termed 'error of transfer'. Although the English language has been nativized to suit our environment, it is expected of the students of English language to be near competent but the teachers' incompetence becomes problematic and thus, jeopardizes students' learning and performance. Their inability to learn and identify the silent letters led to producing erroneous words such as debtor /debtɪ /, corps /kɪ :ps/, Christmas /krɪstmɪ s/ and so on. Also, spoken English sounds do not make up with letters of English alphabets but this does not affect students as they

pronounce words just by looking at them, thereby, each letter represents one sound for them. But in this case, a letter can stand for different sounds depending on the word. For instance: letter 'o' in otiose / ɪ ɪ tɪɪ ɪ s /, bourgeois / bɪ ɪ ɪ wa:/ and so on represent different sounds as in /ɪ ɪ , ɪ ɪ/ respectively. Thus, the pronunciation of English is not governed by a strict set of rules. So, students should develop effective English pronunciation because their speaking skill is revealed much in their pronunciation. Evidently, the eaching of English pronunciation is unduly neglected or ignored and English phonetic course is usually left to chance or given no place in universities thus, led to students' incompetence in their oral communication, especially in English language departments.

Conclusion

As sounds play an important role in communication, foreign language teachers must attribute proper attention to it. Phonological aspect of English is an area which has received little attention from mainstream second language learning because teachers are often left to rely on their intuitions with little direction. And according to Barker (1992), students find that they can improve all aspects of their proficiency in English except their pronunciation, and mistakes which have been repeated for years are impossible to eradicate. The long term solution to this is to have a compulsory phonetics course since an active command of pronunciation will help promote the entire English language processes.

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