NATURE OF PHONOLOGICAL IMPEDIMENTS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND HOW TO TACKLE THEM

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Abstract

This article focuses on influence of phonological impediments in learning English language in Nigeria. Phonology is an aspect of the language that highlights the study of sound systems in language learning. The importance of phonology in language learning cannot be understated because it exposes the learner on the proper pronunciation of words and good knowledge of syllabi and suprasegmental. It is on this premise that this paper discusses among other things to include, language acquisition, phonology, the importance of phoneless and phonology in pronunciation in language, phonological problems encountered by learners of English language, practice activities in teaching pronunciation among others. These concepts and ideas were discussed in line with current realities and pedagogical perspective leading to an appropriate conclusion and recommendations.

Keywords: Influence, phonological, impediments and learning.

Introduction

Language is a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings express themselves. According to Cherian (2022), language is a structured system of communication that consists of grammar and vocabulary. It is the primary means by which humans convey meaning, both in spoken and written forms, and may also be conveyed through sign languages. It is a very important means of communication which is key in every society. One cannot think of a society without language because it is a very important means of communication. Language sharpens people's thoughts, guides and controls their entire activity. "It is a carrier of civilization and culture" (Okorie, 2022). This means that language learning is very crucial in the society.

From the early age, a normal child responds to the sounds which his elders use to communicate with him (them). In his bid to communicate and get his needs identified and satisfied, the child begins to imitate the sounds which he has heard from his eiders. His dire need to communicate with the adult community and his constant hearing and imitation of the language make it possible for him to acquire his mother tongue or his first language. Ogbuehi (2018) asserts that every normal child acquires the sound system and the speech patterns of his mother tongue in a normal way through imitation of sounds from adult speakers. In line with this, Chimezie (2021) note that in the case of the mother tongue, the child learns it easily due to a favorable linguistic environment and high level of exposure to the language.

On the other hand, learning to speak a second language or foreign language usually involves some rigours and challenges because the learner has to learn the sound systems and the prosodic features of the second language against the already firmly consolidated first language in the mind of the learner. The problem is partly that some languages are tonal and syllable-timed and others are stress-timed and various speech sounds have distinctive acoustic properties. The adjustment to these new differences may lead to a mismatch and therefore the learner may produce sounds that cannot be understood by other users of the same language. Mackey (2020) asserts that learning to speak a second language is psychologically demanding because the learner already feels comfortable towards the phonological systems of his native language. Mackey (2020) also agrees that a person who has been using only one language since early childhood has habits and thoughts which are closely tied to his habits of language, and that language is a part of his experience. The author concludes that in learning a second language, the learner has to adjust his/her speech habits to accommodate those of the target language. This according to Okorji (2022), is because languages have their individual peculiar phonological and phonemic features which must be mastered and used by the learner for mutual intelligibility with the native speakers and other users of the language.

Many learners of a second language cannot make this adjustment successfully. They approximate the phonological features of the second or target language with those of their mother tongue. Put in another way, they allow the speech habits of their mother tongue or their first language to interfere with the speech habits of the target language. This phenomenon, according to Haycraft (2021), is known in the language register as phonological interference. Interference refers to the arrangement of patterns that transfer from the introduction of foreign elements into the most highly structured domains of a language such as the phonemic system, the morphological system and some areas of the vocabulary. Interference is the effect of bilingualism or multilingualism. It is a linguistic situation whereby features of the first language are negatively transferred to the first. It is a process that occurs during the period of learning (Gimson, 2020). According to Adediniji (2021), interference is the negative transfer of what obtains in the source languages or Nigerian languages to the target language'. Alabi (2021) noted that the term implies a re-arrangement of patterns that result from the introduction of foreign elements into more highly structured syntax, as well as some areas of vocabulary culture and discourse. In the view of Osisanwo (2020), interference 'has to do with the carryover of the linguistic habits of an individual's first

language to the second language'.

Phonological interference is a term which refers to a linguistic occurrence in which two different languages overlap and the linguistic system of one of the languages is transferred into the other in a process of producing the latter which is the second or target language. Interference, according to Nwangwu (2021), is the major obstacle in the teaching of the English language and it constitutes a great problem to the learning of a second language for it can hinder mutual understanding and intelligibility and consequently affects performance in target language. This has resulted in the variety of English language in Nigeria called "Nigerian English". Mgbodile (2022), is of the view that mother tongue interference is a major problem to second language learners of English. The Nigerian child should be taught to perceive and produce correct pronunciation, stress and intonation in the target language, which in Nigeria is English.

Teaching correct pronunciation, stress, and intonation to Nigerian children may be difficult as Nigeria is a multilingual country. William (2020) observes that teaching English to students that have different mother tongues other than English is complicated and difficult, and worse still when the learning environment is multilingual. This problem is compounded when one considers the fact that for many students, English is not really their second language but third or even the fourth language. Teaching correct pronunciation, stress and intonation becomes more complex when in a class, Student 'A' may have a problem of distinguishing the /r/ sounds, but this may not be the problem of Student 'B' whose speech difficulty is with the pronunciation of words like 'live' and 'leave' so that they sound differently. Student 'C's own difficulty may be that he cannot help inserting a vowel sound in a consonant cluster. From the spoken English of many Nigerians, one can identify from which area they come from. This is because different speech communities have different phonological and interference problems. Ogbuehi (2018) points out 'today, there are many 'hibboleths (speech signs) for identifying people from different areas of Nigeria.

Phonological errors, as generally believed by linguists, were due to interference from the mother tongue. On this basis, they placed a great deal of importance on contrastive analysis. If linguists could analyze the system of both the first and the second languages they would be able to predict the errors that would occur during second language (L2) learning, just as Fries (2023) claims that: the most effective materials for teaching an L2 are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner.

Mother tongue interference has been one of the major causes of poor performance of students in English language at the senior secondary school level. There are also several research reports, which support the view that language inefficiency invariably leads to poor academic performance. In most Secondary schools in Enugu South Local Government Area of Enugu State Nigeria, most students have been writing and rewriting their English language examinations. The major cause for this ugly scenario is poor placement of letters in words which is as a result of their mother tongue interference.

Phonology

Phonology is the study of the sound systems that make up their entire sound system. Some languages share more similar sounds. It is very necessary to note that the goal of phonology is to study the properties of the sound system which speakers must learn and internalize in order to use their language for the purpose of communication. According to Oyebade (2023), phonology is the scientific study of the arbitrary vocal symbol used in human speech and the pattern into which these symbols produce intelligent, meaningful utterances. Phonology is "the study or description of the distinctive sound units (phonemes) of a language and their relationship to one another" (Richards & Schmidt, 2021:433). This branch of linguistics is concerned with how phonemes and their allophones operate in different phonological systems. Adedimji (2021), asserted that phonology is the sub field of linguistics that studies the structure and patterning of sound in

human language.

Throughout history, the study of phonology has witnessed a paradigm shift with the introduction of distinctive features as the smallest units of phonological analysis instead of phonemes. Insofar as the teaching of pronunciation is concerned, this paradigm shift has resulted in two views, namely distinctive-feature analysis and structuralism analysis. In his seminal paper on the issue, (Prator, 2023) attempts to establish a hierarchy of priorities for the teaching of pronunciation. In his treatment, the author presents the two views: a distinctive-feature analysis uses distinctive features as the basic analytical unit while a structuralism analysis makes use of phonemes. For language teachers, Prator (2023) claims that the use of distinctive-feature analysis would be disappointing since those features were mainly developed for classificatory purposes to be used by Chomsky and his co-workers in their typologies (Chomsky & Halle, 2020). In view of this, (Prator, 2023) highlights the importance of going back to a structuralism analysis, as he states: "I believe the phoneme is useful and that teachers of ESL should be familiar with the concept, particularly because it does provide considerable amount of guidance in deciding how to assign priorities in teaching pronunciation". In the same vein, he goes further and justifies his claim in the following statement: "since phonemic distinctions correlate with meaning, they are more important than allophonic distinctions to a student who is learning a language in order to be able to communicate meaning in it".

The importance of phonetics and phonology in the pronunciation in language

For a long period of time, teachers have been concerned with finding the appropriate way of teaching the sounds of a foreign language, which are different from the native language without using the orthographic alphabet. Among the most useful solutions that have been suggested is the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). "The IPA aims to provide visually distinctive symbols for all speech sounds which are phonologically distinct in any language" (Trask,

2019). Since its development, different versions of the IPA have been adopted by teachers to be included in textbooks for teaching pronunciation. In the same vein, phonetics has brought new insights to the teaching of pronunciation. Concerned with "the study of the physical properties of sounds and their place and manner of articulation in the vocal tract" (Broughton, 2011:50), phonetics forms a tool of paramount importance that is used in the teaching of pronunciation. For instance, in any description of the English sound system, speech sounds are categorized into consonants and vowels. Following Haycraft's (2022) argument, consonants can be described depending on the movements of the mouth during the articulation (bilabial, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar) or depending on the nature of the airstream, the place and movement of the tongue, and also whether the voice is used or not (voiced, voiceless, plosive, affricate, fricative, nasal, lateral). On the other hand, vowels are described mainly in terms of the position of the tongue and lip rounding. These detailed phonetic descriptions are not arbitrary since they are paramount to the teaching of pronunciation. According to Haycraft (2022:58), "awareness of this is useful as many mistakes made by learners are due to slight differences in sound production".

Phonological differences between languages—that is, the difference in the sounds that make up different languages—have a major effect on how easy or hard it is for a person to learn a second language. It is far easier for a person to learn a new language with a similar phonology to his first language.

Phonological problems encountered by English language learners

1. **Mother tongue interference:** Interference is the influence of one language, dialect or other linguistics features upon another's phonology, grammar and vocabulary. In the course of using English as a second language, there is inter-lingual interference. That is, the influence of one language upon another's phonology, grammar and vocabulary. The language which a group of people considered to be inhabitants of an area acquire in their

early years and which normally becomes their natural instrument of thought and communication may interfere with the second language, and these interferences may manifest itself in any aspect of the language such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Typically an Igbo man may say 'lead' instead of 'read.'

2. **Motivation and Exposure:** Brophy (2022), describes students' motivation as the extent to which students will invest time, energy, and attention towards various tasks, goals, or activities. "Student's motivation can affect current learning as well as the skills and strategies learnt previously" (Schunk, 2023). Motivation is the strength that pushes the person to achieve a goal; if the learners do not have motivation, the learning process is harder. Motivation is the values, beliefs, and behaviours surrounding learning process. Some productive values and beliefs may lead to excitement, yet other values may lead to determined hard work. When we motivate our students we make them learn better than those who show interest.

3. **Attitude:** Researchers and studies indicate that students with positive attitudes towards learning English learn faster, and students who are genuinely open minded and interested in improving their pronunciation often improve it. Attitudes are created, and can be changed through family, teachers, peers and school. The attitude of the students is the strongest barrier found by them because they do not feel that learning English is important and most of them do not have perspective to future, they are living day by day.

4. **Home Background:** Wallwork in Okoli (2023) states that home background of the child decides more than anything the quality of his mastery of language, for this is where he/she experienced it most day in day out, and over the years of infancy and childhood. Home background plays a very crucial role in a child's pronunciation. The child pronounces words the way the people around him do.

5. **Teachers' incompetence:** For most learners, teachers are the models of person in learning

process. Most learners will believe that what their teachers do is the correct thing. The same perception may happen to most parents. Parents believe that teachers will teach the correct thing to their children. This is a conventional wisdom that teacher is perceived as the one who knows the knowledge of the subjects matters. However, one can imagine the impact of teacher's incorrect pronunciation to the learners. Most teachers are incompetent in phonetic and whatever they teach the student is what they believe is correct.

Pronunciation of English Language

In general terms, pronunciation is defined as "the manner in which speech sounds,especially connected sequences are articulated by individual speakers or by speakers generally" (Trask, 2019:291). In the light of this definition, pronunciation is linked to the study of phonetics which involves the scientific study and description of speech sounds. From a more technical perspective, Pennington and Richards (2013:208) define pronunciation according to language teachers, as follows: "*For most language teachers, pronunciation is largely identified with the articulation of individual sounds and, to a lesser extent, with the stress and intonation patterns of the target language*". In this respect, the second definition does not limit pronunciation only to the way in which sounds are articulated but goes further to incorporate other articulatory aspects, namely stress and intonation patterns.

In addition to this definition, Pennington and Richards (2021) subdivided pronunciation into four major components which include:

i. Segmental features: minimal units of sound defined in phonetic terms.

ii. Voice-setting features: General articulatory characteristics of stretches of speech.

iii. Prosodic features: involving the relative levels of stress and pitch within syllables, words, phrases and longer stretches of speech.

This decomposition of pronunciation into different components is motivated by one simple reason, namely to make the teaching of

pronunciation an easy, manageable task. Throughout the history of language teaching, some teachers asked whether pronunciation could or needed to be taught and others dropped its teaching from their syllabi. However, with the rise of Audio-lingualism and the influence of Behaviorism, teachers started to adopt the "listen and repeat" approach. This approach focused on habit-formation whereby the teacher pronounced isolated words to the students to repeat and the more repetition/imitation was reinforced, the more students would become accurate. Later on, with the rise of the communicative movement in the 1970's and 1980's, the pronunciation component was given less attention due to the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional approaches to its teaching. Alternatively, in the late 1980's with the rise of inter-language studies and the rapid growth in the study of phonology, the teaching of pronunciation regained the attention of teachers and applied linguists. While some of them still continue to adopt the traditional models of drilling and imitation, others have tried to design techniques and methods to integrate the teaching of pronunciation with other basic language skills.

Practical activities in teaching pronunciation
There has been a great deal of debate on what techniques can be used to teach pronunciation effectively. One of the prominent debates centres on whether to teach pronunciation through imitation or through consciousness-raising. In this regard, Jones (2014) highlights the importance of habit-formation and imitation and its persistence in teaching pronunciation even after the rise of communicative language teaching. As he states: "Part of the reason for the focus on habit-formation in acquiring L2 phonology is the special characteristic of pronunciation, which, unlike other language skills, involves both cognitive and motor functions: few would deny that repeated practice of motor functions results in increased dexterity.". One of the prominent techniques used in the teaching of pronunciation is one that makes use of phonemes and minimal pairs. According to Cook (2021), the concepts of phoneme and minimal pair have proved useful in organizing materials

for teaching pronunciation. Generally, students are presented with pairs of words like "car" / ka:/ versus "cow" / kau/ or "bra" /bra:/ versus "brow" /bravo/. Then, they are asked whether they are different or not. This allows the teacher to build the whole phonemic inventory from scratch. Furthermore, for students, learning how to distinguish one phoneme from another becomes easy by distinguishing minimal pairs. Another application of the same technique is discussed in Bowen (2023). According to the latter, a contrast (or minimal pair) is illustrated, explained and then presented for identification by students. For instance, for the contrast [base/vase], two words will be presented, sometimes alike (base...base), and sometimes different (base.. .vase). Students will be asked to respond "same" or "different". Furthermore, the words can also be given one at a time with instructions to raise the left arm if "base" is heard or the right arm if it is "vase". In this way, the teacher can make use of several contrasts which can be practiced later by students.

Five difficult areas of phonology
English is a difficult language to pronounce. Different individuals might find various parts of the phonology of English complicated-if not near impossible-to grasp. The areas that are considered to be the most complex or confusing are:
i.   Stress on words
ii.   Vowel and consonant sounds
iii. Combined sounds
iv.   Physical attributes
v.   Translation between languages

Stress on Words
In English a different stress is placed on words that are spelled exactly the same, depending upon the meaning that the speaker wishes to create. For example, with the word "record," there is a different stress based on whether we wish to refer to the noun of a piece of music media or to the verb for the actual act of registering or putting in writing a piece of information or saving a piece of music. Therefore, English language learners cannot simply base the pronunciation of a word on what they see. They also need to learn to look for contextual clues around that word, in order to determine the correct way to pronounce it.

Vowel and consonant sounds

English language learners need to distinguish between vowels and consonants. After learning these most basic letter sounds, they also have to learn that these letters do not always make the same sound. For example:

a. The vowel "a" makes a very different sound in the word "bake" than it does in the word "apple."

b. Consonants can change a bit as well. A "t" in the word "tackle" is very different in sound from a "t" in the word "the."

The pronunciation of vowel and consonant sounds vary with the word in which they are used.

Combined sounds

Sometimes when consonants come together, the pronunciation gets confusing. A non-native speaker would see "t" and "h" and want to pronounce those sounds separately. However, they come together to create a blended sound. Another example of this is when the letters "c" and "k" come together in words as a back, rack, pack, tackle, and so forth.

The person learning English would see these two letters as distinct, yet when people speak, he or she hears them as blended together into one sound which understandably can cause at least a bit of confusion.

Physical Attributes

The way in which people speak is, of course, related to physical properties of the mouth region. For example, there are some words which absolutely require speakers to put both of their lips together in order to produce the sound. The letters "b" and "p" are two such examples. While it seems natural to a native speaker, those who do not know how to say these sounds have to learn these processes which are entirely commonplace to the English speaker.

Another view, held by scientists specializing in Language acquisition, such as Tomasello, argues that young children's early language is concrete and item-based which in plies that their speech is based on the lexicon items known to them from the environment and the language of their caretakers. In addition, children do not produce creative utterances about past experiences and future expectations because they have not had enough exposure to their target language to do so. Thus, this indicates that the exposure to language plays more of a role in a child's linguistic competence than just their innate abilities.

Conclusion

The issues discussed in this article are of immense benefits to school teachers, students, parents, presenters, and the government. The findings of the study showed that mother tongue impinges on pronunciation in English among secondary school students. This implies that, for learners of English to improve on their pronunciation, they must identify the areas where they have flaws, listen to BBC News in order to build up their pronunciation, and they should also try to pronounce those consonant and vowel sounds that mother tongue affects in the presence of their friends

The article also showed that incompetence of teacher influence learners' pronunciation. This means that, for teachers to work on their incompetence and to help learners of English on their pronunciation, they would have to use tape-recorder to teach phonetic, drill the student well on phonetics and phonology and also check the students' pronunciation and correct them when they are wrong.

The study also revealed that family background influence learners' pronunciation in the study of English. This implies that students learn a lot from their parents and the people they start speaking with at their early age are their parents. The students would tend to pronounce words the way their parents do. However, for students to improve on their pronunciation, parents should try to help them building up their pronunciation by correcting them when they pronounce the wrong words and communicate with them in English. In addition, the government should provide language laboratory that has tape-recorder for students and teachers of English. This will help in smooth running of teaching phonetics and phonology. Both the school and parents should work jointly to tackle phonological problems. It was also observed that teachers' inefficiency in English language rudiments

contributed to students' low articulation in phonology.

Recommendations

Based on the arguments in the paper, the researchers hereby made the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should drill students on phonology for efficiency purposes
2. Teachers should endeavour to check students' pronunciation skills and give them comprehension passages or essay to read in the class in order to engage them phonologically.
3. Parents should encourage their children to listen to news that are educative.
4. Teachers should also endeavour to use stress pattern in pronunciation drills.
5. Government should provide adequate facilities for teaching phonetics for both students and teachers, especially for the provision of language laboratory.
6. Finally, if these recommendations are judiciously applied by parents and teachers, it will help to reduce the problems learners' encounter in phonetics.

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