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Investigating English Pronunciation of Speakers of Asante Twi: A Case of Wesley College of Education Level 100 Students, Ghana

Frimpong Stephen Jnr.
Lecturer, Department of English, Wesley College of Education and Ucc –Code, Ghana
Lydia Aidoo
Lecturer, Department of English, Akrokerri College of Education, Ghana
Efua Oduro Patience
Assistant Registrar, Department of Language, Cape Coast Technical University, Ghana
Charles Paulick
Lecturer, Department of English, St. Joseph's College of Education English, Ghana

Abstract:
English language pronunciation teaching is typically based on native speakers' norms. English is spoken all over the world. It has become a lingua franca for many people, an international language that ends up promoting successful communication for all. It is a medium of instruction for our learners from Basic Four to the tertiary level. Despite this, English pronunciation presents a lot of difficulties to its users, as it is inconsistent with the spelling of words. The problem exists with speakers of Asante Twi as students of Wesley College of Education who use it as a second language. They make errors in pronouncing some English words. Against this background, this study seeks to assess the pronunciation intelligibility of speakers of English whose first language is Asante Twi. It is worthwhile to identify and analyse their peculiar difficulties and get a specific prescription to correct the errors. The study findings will have significant pedagogical implications for teaching English pronunciation at Wesley College of Education. It will help raise awareness among teacher trainees of the critical problems they are going to face in the future as teachers.

Keywords: *Native language, phonetic ability, pronunciation, challenges, asante twi, segmental, supra-segmental, intonation, intelligibility*

1. Introduction

Clearly, the native language is the most influential factor affecting a learner's pronunciation since the learners freely bring their different accents from their native language into the English classroom, then their English pronunciations sound awkward. This creates a big problem in English pronunciation.

In recent years, English has been increasingly used in Ghana, but Ghanaian English teachers and students (learners) encounter several significant challenges, one such challenge being pronunciation. Numerous research have provided evidence for these challenges and problems in producing accurate pronunciation confronting Ghanaian students, in which Level 100 students of Wesley College of Education are no exception (Kent, 2008; More & Bounchem, 2010). However, the specific factors influencing pronunciation learning among students and suggestions to improve pronunciation teaching seem to have received little attention in the literature on pronunciation teaching and learning in our schools.

This study attempts to provide insights into the factors that influence English pronunciation among Level 100 students of Wesley College of Education and suggests some practical activities to improve the learning of English pronunciation among Asante Twi speakers.

1.1. Factors Influencing English Pronunciation Learning

In language learning, pronunciation refers to the production and perception of the important sounds of a specific language in order to successfully use language in meaningful contexts or gain communicative competence (Brown, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001). English sound system has been divided into two different groups known as segments and suprasegmental features (Godwin, 2014). Segments are made up of consonants and vowels, including stressed and unstressed syllables, while suprasegmental features include stress, length, tone, and intonation (Johnson, 2011). Speakers from different socio-cultural backgrounds are likely to retain their own accents, highlighting the significance of the socio-cultural background from which they come.

1.1.1. Innate Phonetic Ability

Phonetic ability is sometimes called phonetic coding ability (Brown, 1992). The common view is that some language learners are able to discriminate between two sounds more accurately and imitate sounds better than others. It is known as having an 'ear.' People can find themselves easily learning a language because they are used to hearing it when they are children. Some students may know phonetic coding that others do not. However, not all learners born and living in native-speaking environments can achieve native pronunciation all the time because learners are born with various phonetic abilities, biology, and physiology.

1.1.2. Native Language

This factor influences the students if they learn a new language. Some languages that become the native language of students do not have certain phonemes like what English has; this gives students a problem pronouncing some words. The major influential factor impacting a learner's pronunciation is the essential role of the native. All languages in the world have a wide range of phonological elements. These variations bring about some difficulties. Students' awareness and their efforts play a significant role in improving their English pronunciation.

1.1.3. Expose to the Target Language

Someone who spends much time in a foreign land does not mean he/she makes improvements in his/her pronunciation. Social environment is very important since it has the best chance to expose themselves to the second/target language. The more the learner is exposed to the target language, the more he/she improves his/her pronunciation. Learners need to be surrounded with input in the target language through a lot of opportunities inside and outside the classroom.

1.1.4. The Ego of the Speaker

Attitude turns out to be an influence of the speaker in the target language and understanding the language ego to recognize the speaker. Speakers use language to display their identities and membership in particular socio-cultural settings.

1.1.5. Age

Beginners will speak and sound like native speakers when learning the language, while people who have already learnt it will just focus on and maintain a 'foreign' account. Generally, children under puberty can maintain perfect or native-like pronunciation in a second language if they are continuously exposed to the actual pronunciation. The period beyond puberty is so critical that the acquisition of a normal language becomes difficult or, at times, impossible.

1.1.6. Motivation for Good Pronunciation

Some learners think that pronunciation is not important. The ability to speak and express oneself in English is enough, but others do. Motivation will support learners to have good pronunciation. Some learners will achieve native-like pronunciation when their intrinsic motivation is high.

2. Literature Review

English holds an important position as the official language of Ghana and is used as a lingua franca throughout the country. English remains the designated language for all official and formal purposes. Ghanaian English is a variety of English spoken in Ghana.

Of the more than 31 million people in Ghana, more than half of the population uses English, and most use English exclusively. Primary and secondary school classes at public schools and schools that prepare for public certificates are taught in English only.

Due to Ghana's colonial history, Ghanaian English most closely resembles British English. However, it is believed that it varies and deviates from the standard in many ways based on location and context.

In contrast to the twelve monophthongal vowels of Received Pronunciation, Ghanaian English has only seven, an attribute shared with other forms of African English. Ghanaian English exhibits several mergers, including the fleece-kit, foot-goose, and thought-cloth mergers.

In Ghanaian English, the voiceless alveolar-palatal sibilant [ɕ] is the usual realization of the phoneme /ʃ/ (as in 'ship,' Chicago), the voiceless alveolar-palatal affricate [tɕ] is the usual realization of [tʃ] (as in 'cheese' and 'watching') and the voiced alveolar-palatal affricate [dʑ] is the usual realization of [dʒ] (as in 'general' and 'magic').

2.1. Teaching and Learning of English Pronunciation

According to Asante-Nimako (2018), many English language instructors and learners often do not see the importance or the need to teach and learn the pronunciation of various words. It may be because right from the beginning of learning English as a second language, the learners were not told the importance or value of pronunciation in effective communication, especially between people of different linguistic backgrounds.

Asante, also known as Ashanti, or Asante Twi, is one of the principal members of the Akan dialect continuum. It is one of the four mutually intelligible dialects of Akan, collectively known as Twi, Bono, Akuapem, and Fante (Dolphyne, 1988). Carter and Nunom (2001) showed that the mother tongue clearly influences learning L2 pronunciation while the

mother tongue, like accent, interferes with the English language. English pronunciation and phonology deal with one's knowledge of the sound system of a language, then it is concerned with competence.

- English phonology is divided into two branches – segmental phonology and suprasegmental phonology.
- Segmental phonology is based on segmenting language into individual speech sounds provided by phonetics. Segmental phonology concerns the function and possible combination of the sounds within the sound system.
- Suprasegmental phenology is connected to those features of pronunciation that cannot be segmented because they extend over more than one segment or sound. Its features include stress, rhythm, and intonation.

2.2. Segmental Aspect of Pronunciation

In the segmental aspect, each sound is considered a 'unit' or 'segment' of a word or phrase. A bottom-up approach, knowing all the phonemes, is built from there. Consonants are sounds that cannot be mistaken for another sound. Whereas consonants are characterized by vocal tract constriction, high-frequency components, and often aperiodicity, vowels are characterized by sustained voicing and a dominant lower-frequency formant structure (Owen & Cardillo, 2006). For auditory speech presentations, consonants and vowels are characterized by different acoustic features (Stevens, 2002). While coarticulation blurs the boundaries between consonants and vowels such that even the division of speech sounds into these two general categories is considered convenience (Ladefoged, 2001).

There is no certainty that explicit instruction in pronunciation would guarantee that non-native language learners would improve their pronunciation. However, students need constant training. English language instructors should be aware of the differences in our intonations and the influence of the mother tongues. According to Carr (2008), segmental phonology is the study of segmental phenomena such as vowel and consonant allophones. Segments are psychologically real objects which enter into the speech-planning process and are reflected in a slip of the tongue phoneme.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the value of pronunciation as the theoretical framework. Pronunciation is the study of speech, sound, and language. Kreidler (2004) stated that in the discussion of the pronunciation of English, we can focus on three aspects, namely:

- Phonetics – The individual sounds in a language,
- Word stress – The syllables in a word and where to place the main stress or accent, and
- Sentence stress – How we pronounce words when we put them together in sentences

Speech is an activity that is carried on for numerous activities and events. Brown (2000) was also of the view that language is a system of arbitrary conventionalized vocal, written, or gestural symbols that allow people in a given community to communicate intelligibly with one another. According to Seidlhofer (1995), pronunciation is the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in contexts of language. As already indicated, this comprises the production and perception of the segmental sounds of stressed and unstressed syllables, giving the voice quality. Whenever we speak, all the aspects of speech simultaneously start working.

Although attaining native-like pronunciation that facilitates mutual intelligibility is considered essential for many language learners and teachers alike, only a few research have been conducted on the influence of pronunciation in applied linguistics (Dewing & Munro, 2005). It is widely accepted that suprasegmentals are very important to intelligibility, but only a few experts support these ideas.

According to Madsen and Bowen (1978), there was a lack of attention to pronunciation, which was prevalent in the communicative approach, and a direct assertion by many that pronunciation could not be taught. This idea sparked numerous studies in second language acquisition that suggested a departure from the traditional bottom-up phonemic-based approach to pronunciation teaching toward a top-down orientation focusing on suprasegmental or prosodic aspects such as rhythm, intonation, and duration. This brought about the environmental-oriented theory, which was proposed by John Schuman (1978). It was used in the field of linguistics, precisely second language acquisition. He defines it as "the social and psychological integration of the learner with the Target Language (TL) group.

2.4. Study Rationale

The current research study aims to obtain the opinion of eleven students of Level 100 undergraduate participants from Bachelor of Education, Primary Education Programme, and their pronunciation of English language. The students made mistakes in respect of phonology – wrong stress, mispronunciation of words, and wrong stress and wrong pronunciation.

This study aims to recognize the pronunciation problems of the eleven students whose mother tongue is Asante Twi to identify the support needs and implement strategy teaching for the learners. It attempts to examine the participants by taking them through a series of pronunciation tests to enhance their pronunciation skills. Teaching pronunciation in English language with the influence of the mother tongue is very difficult, and there are different methods or strategies that the facilitator can use in teaching effective pronunciation skills (Roach, 2009).

2.5. Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

- What are the common problems encountered by students with pronunciation skills?
- What influence does mother tongue (L1) have on the learners' pronunciation skills?
- What are the effective pronunciation skills of the learners?

3. Methodology

The research method deals with how the study questions proposed are processed with a particular method. According to Cohen, Mammon & Morrison (2007), the method is an approach used in educational research to gather data that are used for interpretation and prediction.

This study aims to investigate the difficulties that second language learners face in pronunciation in English. The study used the descriptive method in the work. This study is conducted in Ghana for Level 100 students of Wesley College of Education. Some words were recorded, and the students were asked to pronounce them to find out if, indeed, they have difficulties in the pronunciation of some of the English words and which suitable strategies could be used to help improve their pronunciations. The results were analyzed on descriptive bases.

3.1. Sample of the Study

The study sample contains eleven Level 100 students for School Teaching Support (STS). All eleven students were used for the study.

3.2. Data Collection

The researchers used two research tools to collect the data. The tools were recording tests and observations. They were structured to give accurate results of the problem at hand facing the students (participants).

3.3. Recording Test

Using the testing exercises, the researchers recorded some words for the students to listen to and pronounce. The words were:

- Computer   – [kƏm'pju:tƏ]
- Airplane   – [Ɛ:rƏplƐjn]
- Hospital   – [h0spltl]
- Education   – [Ɛ'dӡƏkƐjƒƏn]
- Refrigerator   – [rIfrIdӡƏreItƏ]
- Reciprocal   – [risiprɗkI]
- Recent   – [ri:snt]
- Admonish   – [ɗd'mɔniʃ]
- Confirmation   – [ˌkˌɔƏ'mæIʃn]
- Abduct   – [Əb'dʌkt]
- Measure   – [meӡƏ]

3.4. Observation

Aside from the above words, the participants were given some sentences for them to read.

- My uncle was a pastor.
- My grandmother is a professional singer.
- She didn't know the reason why I left.
- Do you sing when you are eating?
- It had only just stopped raining.
- The church opens at 9:00 am in the morning.

3.5. Results and Discussions

The researchers analyzed the data based on the research questions.

Question 1: What are the common problems encountered by students with pronunciation?

Students were not taught orals/speech at the basic level.

4 out of 11 = 36.3% – Lack of language teachers teaching oral at the basic level.

5 out of the 11 = 45.5% – Not using effective strategies to teach orals.

2, representing 18.3%.

The recorded test revealed that the students had pronunciation problems. This came to light when students were asked to pronounce the 11 words after each pronunciation by one of the researchers. Each of the students pronounced the words twice aloud, and their pronunciations were recorded.

Question 2: What influence has mother tongue (L1) had on learners' pronunciation skills?

The evidence of the mother tongue on English pronunciation was obvious. This manifested in the form of the incorrect pronunciation of the words and reading of the sentences. The observation and monitoring showed that the mother tongue (Asante Twi) interfered with the second language pronunciation. The mother tongue like-accent was able to affect the ability to pronounce the words and reading of the sentences. All the respondents were not able to pronounce the eleven words correctly.

Stress, intonation is a problem – 9 students, representing 81%.

Mother tongue affects their pronunciation – all the 11 students, representing 100%.

Question 3: What are the effective pronunciation methods/strategies that need to be applied to improve the learner's pronunciation skills?

After the test recording exercises and observation of the respondents' reading the various sentences, the need to practice perfect pronunciation came in. It was realized that the following strategies were to be adopted to improve the students' pronunciation.

- Listening to examples of authentic speech is the most obvious way to improve their own pronunciation. Also, watching movies in their original versions.
- Getting the phonetic chart, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), is a visual representation of different sounds, which will help students to learn current pronunciation. All dictionaries have a phonetic transcription of words so that you know how to pronounce them.

3.6. The Phoneme Chart

Figure 1: Voiced and Unvoiced

- Do some exercises – different languages have different sounds, as in Asante Twi, and our mouths adapt to those sounds. Some sounds are physically very difficult for us to make, as they don't exist in the students' native languages. Many Asante Twi speakers have problems with words and phrases containing the

letter 'r,' but they tend not to pronounce the 'r' sound. Examples are:

TWI	ENGLISH	PRONUNCIATION
biribiara	everything	/biibiaa/
sei ara	just like this	/seiaa, seyiaa/
barima	man	/bææma /
biribi	something	/biibi/

- Get to know minimal pairs of English vowels. Minimal pairs are words that have almost the exact same pronunciation but with one sound that is different. Examples are:

Ball	tall	die	lie	hip	hit
/Bɒl/	/Tɒl/	/DaI/	/Lai/	/HIp/	/HIt/

This can be difficult to hear for many language learners and comes up in lots of different words. The first thing is to be able to tell the difference between the sounds when you hear them.

- Teaching methods for intonation, syllable stress, and vowel length – intonation indicates the way in which our voices rise or fall when speaking certain phrases or sentences to evoke emotion or meaning. One's voice should fall with regular statements or questions that expect more than a one-word answer.

Syllable stress requires special attention. Specific activities and pronunciation exercises should be developed for mastering syllable stress. The students were asked to begin to count the number of syllables in a word by clapping them out.

Teaching vowel length was also introduced.

	Front		Central		Back	
	short / long		short / long		short / long	
High	/i/	/i: /			/u/	/u: /
Middle	/ ɛ /	/e: /			/ɔ/	/ɔ: /
Low			/a/	/a: /		

Vowel length contrasts with more than two phonemic levels, which are rare.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the area of English pronunciation of speakers of Asante Twi that students face in their speaking, a case of Wesley College of Education Level 100 students of School Teaching Support (STS). The purpose of the study was to identify the problems that the students face, and the researchers attempted to find suitable solutions to the problems. Recorded tests and observations were used to find out the students' weaknesses in pronunciation as they read.

The findings showed that there are many problems that students face in their pronunciation with the influence of the mother tongue. At the same time, it was realized that there are a lot of methods/strategies that teachers of English language could use to address pronunciation problems with the influence of the mother tongue. It also came out that students are not taught orals/speech work at the basic level, some schools do not have actual language teachers to introduce the learners' basic pronunciation rules, and some teachers are not using effective strategies to teach orals/speech work at the basic levels of our education and more importantly, the problem of stress intonation were seen as the major problem the students were facing. Others are lack of vocabulary, lack of practice, bad teaching experiences, lack of self-confidence, and lack of direct contact with the language.

5. Recommendations

There are numerous recommendations that could be suggested based on the results and the findings of the study. Among them is the need for qualified language teachers who alone should teach pronunciation, using interesting and suitable strategies/methods in teaching English pronunciation, effective teaching of pronunciation should be introduced as a subject on its own.

6. Acknowledgements

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