The Problems of Oral Production of Speech Sounds in the Teaching and Learning of English Grammar

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ABSTRACT

The work is principally concerned with the problems of oral production of speech sounds in the teaching and learning of English Grammar. Obviously, there are phonological rules that guide the oral production of speech sounds just as there are grammatical rules that guide the formation of words and sentences. It is absolutely necessary to examine how the oral production of speech sounds affects the teaching and learning of English Grammar. This, therefore, accounts for the much attention given to the pronunciation principles in this research work. Ordinarily, it would have been better for words to be pronounced the way they are spelt and written, but this is not always the case. Phonemic transcription brings out clearly the correct pronunciation of the word and the correct pronunciation goes a long way to provide the clue for the proper classification of the word. This fact is clearly illustrated in such words as "record", "rebel", "import" and a number of other words which have dual membership, meaning and function. Therefore, the correct pronunciation of such words will help the learner to understand the parts of speech to which a word belongs and the function it performs. There are words that look alike and are similar in spellings, but it is

through correct pronunciation of these words that they can be classified in terms of function and meaning. Sentences, of course, have distinguishing features, according to their types and the correct oral presentation of the sentences projects the type, function and structure easily. The implications of correct pronunciation in the teaching and learning of English grammar is therefore, very important for fruitful grammatical studies.

Keywords: phonological, pronunciation, classification, formation, and implications.

Introduction

Most native speakers of English modify complicated sequences in connected speech in order to simplify the articulation process. This habit has created problems in the part of learners of English as a second language as they are not trained enough to extract word sequences from the running speech (Vandegrift, 2007). As a consequence, wrong production of speech sounds occurs, which often leads to the failure in the listening comprehension.

British Colonial Government introduced formal education in Nigeria and the English language which is their language was used as a means of instruction. Hence, for one to be considered educated, one must be competent in reading and writing English. The English language is one of the important heritages left behind in Nigeria by the British government at the end of the colonial administration. It is the master-key to advancement in education. The English language has the enabling quality of linking the various heterogeneous ethnic groups of Nigeria in terms of communication. This is because in Nigeria today, it is the language of science and technology as well as passport to educational advancement and prestigious employment. It is a means of national and international communication. Okafor (1995), says that English appears indispensable to modern living, and our children must be given maximum encouragement and opportunity to learn it effectively in our schools. This assertion implies that the English language removes inferiority complex from anyone who has achieved proficiency in it. Such a person can communicate as well as associate with anybody irrespective of the person's social or political standard or affiliation. English conquers barriers and any speaker of this language can keep in touch with the whole world without leaving his house.

Precisely, the English language is divided into two parts. They are the spoken form and the written form of English. Spoken English tends to be different from written English in some obvious ways. In writing, for instance, one has time to plan one's message, think about it carefully while writing and revising it afterward, whereas in speech, there is no time to do these because the message is shaped as one speaks. Most often, in spoken English, we use phrases like “well”, “you see”, and “kind of” which add little information, but tell us about the speaker's attitude to his audience and to what he is saying. Hesitation normally occurs while speaking. In the English language, there are some hesitation fillers such as “er” and “um” which are used to fill gaps while one thinks of what to say next. According to Leach and Brown (1990), The grammar of spoken sentences is simpler and less strictly constructed than the grammar of written sentences'. This notwithstanding, students seem to give the written aspect greater attention than the spoken form. This should, as a matter of necessity, be discouraged by teachers-in-charge of the English language because spoken language is tied closely to most human beings' daily activities while the written language is not.

Going by this, therefore, a proper production of oral speech sounds in English is not unconnected with the teaching and learning of English grammar. An adequate knowledge of grammatical rules and the use of these rules in the formation of sentences are complemented by a good production of the words in isolation and in connected speech. Words that are formed alphabetically in English are articulated according to the phonetic sounds. A person who acquires the rules of oral production of speech sounds in English, therefore, can exploit these rules for effective production of words which one uses in grammatical sentences. Before one attains this stage, one must have heard the sounds of English from a

speaker. This makes oral speech necessary for the learning of other skills in the English language. The fact remains indisputable that there is no regular relationship between spelling and sound in the English language, but effective oral communication skill has a great bearing on writing since oral communication is the primary mode of communication while writing is the secondary mode of communication. Writing depends on speaking skill greatly. For instance, if a learner of English spells the words the way they are pronounced, there is the possibility of spelling them appropriately. Every language has both phonological and grammatical rules. The English language is one of these languages that has these rules.

Obviously, there are forty-four sounds that make up the sound system of the English language. There are twenty vowel sounds which are made up of twelve pure vowels and eight diphthongs, and twenty-four consonant sounds. The vowel sounds are those sounds that one produces without the obstruction of the air stream from the lungs while consonant sounds are those sounds that one produces with some measure of obstruction somewhere in the vocal cavity. The organs of speech otherwise known as articulators for the articulation of these sounds are the teeth, the tongue, the lips, the uvular, the palate and the alveolar ridge. Phonologically, the sounds so produced are arranged in a meaningful sequence. The phonemes /i/, /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, can be arranged to form words as bid /bid/, bit /bit/, bead /bi:d/, beat /bi:t/, piss /pis/, peace /pi:s/. The /i/ and /i:/ sounds are vowels which are usually produced with the vibration of the vocal cords. The /p/ and /t/ sounds are voiceless alveolar plosives. The voiceless alveolar plosive is normally produced without the vibration of the vocal cords. The /d/ sound is a voiced alveolar plosive. This is produced with the vibration of the vocal cords. The voiced

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alveolar plosive is weaker in articulation than the voiceless alveolar plosive, but the vowel in bead /bi:d/ is longer than the vowel in bit /bit/. This phonological rule is applicable to other pairs in /pb/ bilabial plosive, /td/ alveolar plosives and /kg/ velar plosives. The syllables are either stressed or unstressed and therefore, highly pitched or lowly pitched. Another rule is that if the phoneme /r/ at the end of a vowel is followed by another word that begins with a vowel, the /r/ is pronounced as a linking /r/. That is, in words like for instance , the phonemic transcription and their production is /fəinstəns/. Words are syllabified according to syllable boundaries. For example, the word education is syllabified and transcribed like this edu – ca – tion. /edʒʊˈkeɪʃn/. All phonemes that make up the syllables are characterized distinctively. The English language builds up its vocabulary through the morphological process of affixation, that is, the addition of prefixes and suffixes. The formation of grammatical sentences follows a particular sequence indicated by the four structural elements. These elements are the subject + verb + object + adjunct (SVOA) structure. However, the proper use of the right structural elements is facilitated by the manipulation of the rules of phonology.

Globally, the position occupied by the informal spoken variety of the English Language has since changed owing to some factors. One of such factors is that there was the realization that spoken language was deemed primary both in the historical development of the human race and the development of the individual. In classroom practice, speech therefore, has come to be regarded as the foundation of the language work. A good grounding in speech work is naturally seen as constituting a good basis for learning to read and write in a well planned language work. In the linguistic situation obtaining in Nigeria where English is a second language (L2), ability to speak natural informal English Language is

important. This factor alone prompted the government to make oral English compulsory in the secondary schools. However, despite the rules in grammar, it seems that there is difficulty in the teaching and learning of the English language in schools and, students still seem to perform poorly in speech while using English. This is the problem that this paper sought to interrogate and proffer explanation to.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the survey research design was used. This is because the researcher was only interested in describing certain variable in relation to the population notably, the areas students find most difficult in Spoken English. Hence, the opinions of students and teachers were sought through questioning technique, "what are the aspects of spoken English students find most difficult?" and students were also tested. The researcher will also use all the SSIII students in all the post primary schools in Ofu Local Government Area of Kogi State to do his findings on the problems of oral production of speech sounds in English. In this direction, the researcher will use random sampling techniques to select Ejule town in Ofu Local Government Areas of Kogi State, considering the fact that thirteen out of the seventeen post primary schools in Ofu Local Government Area of Kogi State have reached the SS III level, and that ten out of these thirteen post primary schools will be randomly sampled for the purpose of this study. In each of these ten schools, two classes of SS III will be randomly sampled for the work. In each of these classes, twenty-five students would be randomly sampled. This put

together shall give us five hundred students for the study. In the same vein, fifty teachers of English will also be used for the study. The researcher shall also use recorded cassette in the English language to test the students in listening comprehension and the oral production of speech sounds in English. And finally, the researcher shall analyze and collect the results of the data collected. Sampling shall be tabulated to indicate the schools, number of students and the number of teachers as seen below:

School s	Number of student s	Number of teacher s
1.	5 0	5
2.	5 0	5
3.	5 0	5
4.	5 0	4
5.	5 0	6
6.	5 0	5
7.	5 0	5
8.	5 0	5
9.	5 0	5
10.	5 0	5
Tota l	50 0	5 0

Problem Areas in the Production of Oral Speech Sounds

The problems of oral production of speech sounds in English have become a subject of major concern to educationists in general and the English language specialists in particular. As such some studies which have some relevance to this topic have been carried out. Some of them dealt with such problems as problems of unqualified and incompetent teachers, bad method of teaching, lacking of the use of suitable instructional gadgets while others concentrated on environment and its influence on oral production of distinct speech sounds in terms of English words.

Hwelett (2006), lays emphasis only on the dread of oral English in certificate examination in the former East Central State. In his research, he randomly selected six out of one hundred and fifty-six secondary

schools in the former East Central State. This is less than eighteen percent (18%) of the total population. He formulated some hypotheses, used questionnaires and oral interview in collecting his data. After his analysis, the researcher concludes that many children dread oral English either because it is not taught at all in their school or because it is so badly taught that they get fed up with it. But the researcher did not try to find out why Oral English was not taught at all or why it was so badly taught or the possible problems the student may encounter in the teaching and learning of oral English when it was being taught. It is on this premise that the present research work sets out to find out the problems of oral production of speech sound in English. A conscious study of related literature reveals a number of problems in the teaching of English as a second language. These are:

- Interference of the mother tongue
- Lack of professionally qualified teachers
- Lack of instructional materials and finally, the divisive attitude of the public to correct production of oral speech sounds militate against the teaching and learning of oral English.

Ingram (2007), attributes the problems of oral production of speech sounds in English to many reasons. These are:

- The inaccurate listening and pronunciation habits of students.
- Interference of native language in pronunciation.
- Over consciousness of difference between the first and target language tends to make the learner substitute the exotic phonemes of the English language for other sounds in their language. Examples: the Igalas use /oda/ for "order" and /leda/ for "leather" while Yorubas substitute /st/ for "s" as in "shearing" instead of "steering".

- There is also the problem of initial orthographic "h" in English. A wrong production of it results in a wrong selection of the indefinite article "a" or "an" with the result that we have such utterances as "a heir" and "an highland" and so on.
- Another is the problem of homophony which contributes to the decline in the standard of English.

Good pronunciation is acquired through listening to good speakers, radio, television and by constant practices. According to Ingram (2007), problems of oral speech in English are attributed to the fact that instead of listening attentively to correct articulation and getting the facts down, students are interested only in getting the facts down. In school activities, reading is unique. It is a subject of instruction as well as a tool for the mastery of other subjects of the curriculum. It improves the listening and speech already developed. There is the consciousness of the difference between the mother tongue and the second language (L2). Due to this fact, learners tend to substitute some phonemes of the English language for other sounds in their own language. The Yoruba will say "and" instead of "hand". The Hausas insert vowels where there are consonant clusters. An example: "buredi" in place of "bread". The Tivs substitute /r/ for /l/. Therefore, in pronunciation, they say "rift" instead of "lift". Elaborating on the problems posed by the interference of the mother tongue in oral production of sounds in English, Walch says that most of the lexical and grammatical errors in students' writing can be traced ultimately to wrong operations on the phonological level. This contention is buttressed by high incidence of interference noticed in vowels and consonants. In English, for instance, we have a regular occurrence of consonant cluster as consonants, vowel, consonants (CVC) unlike in the Igala language where the canonical forms, that is, the regular forms are virtually an

unchanging pattern of consonant vowel (CV), consonant vowel (CV), that is, (CVCV). This is why many Igala students studying English as a second language will, for instance, articulate school /sekpulu/ when asked to produce /sku:l/.

Causes of the Problems of Oral Production of Speech Sounds in English

It is an indispensable fact that, man is a product of nature. As a result of that, adverse environment can ruin the potentials of a gifted child. Talking of environmental influence, we understand that both social and economic factors affect the performance of any child in spoken English. Onuigbo (2005), states that although intelligence may be inherited, school environment is apparently determined to a substantial degree. Learning is improved when rich environment is provided. Therefore, poor environment militates against learning. Okoh (2010), opines that poor performance and irregular attendance to school are common among students from lower socio-economic background. Buttressing the above argument, Onuigbo says that teaching occurs in a societal concept and so the environment influences the rate of internalization. The researcher is of the opinion that environment constitutes a problem to teachers and students who come from backgrounds that see the English language just as the language of instruction. This means that English is regarded mainly as a language used for the purpose of learning in the classroom. This, therefore, discourages talented, serious and industrious students. In fact, before students begin to learn the English language as a second language, they have already begun to use the language of their immediate environment. This mother tongue interferes with the English because there is the tendency for the students, after years of exposure to their mother tongue,

to carry over their spoken habits of the language to the acquisition of the new one which is English. Awoniyi also opines that interference of the mother tongue is a hindrance to proficiency and fluency in English. The bilingual child does not only have to acquire the same reading skills as the native speakers of English, but his task is made more complicated by some factors especially the mother tongue and inconsistencies in the English language. Some students find it very difficult to differentiate between what is orally articulated and what is written. Some words which are in use may be out of use, obsolete, while some that are not in use are suddenly reintroduced. Little says that oral language changes all the time since people are always thinking of new ways to say what they want to say or use old words in new senses to fit into new circumstances. This statement is acceptable, but it poses a problem to the learners of English because learners find it difficult to adopt the words in their new circumstances. For instance, the word "silly" was formally understood as an insulting word, but now the meaning can be taken to be "naivety". Supporting further, Jacquemot (2006), says that there are also words in which a letter is silent because it represents no sound.

Examples:

Lamb - /læm/
Debt - /det/
Comb - /kəʊm/
Doubt - /daʊt/
Plumber - /plʌm.ə/
Dumb - /dʌm/
Limb - /lɪm/
Subtle - /ˈsʌtl/

A second language learner may not be aware of these

inconsistencies and may tend to articulate the "b" such as in comb and limb. The inconsistency in the English language stretches to the pronunciation of words which may change over the years while their spellings remain the same. The pronunciation of words such as "forehead" and "tortoise" have changed from /ˈfɔːhəd / to / fɔːrid/ and from /ˈtɔːtis/ to /ˈtɔːʧəs/.The consequences of these are that both the pronunciations are used and students do not know when they are right or wrong. Moreover, many English words are borrowed from other languages and the English language strives to remain as evidenced in words of Latin and French origins. Consequently "Island" is pronounced /ˈailənd/ while the silent "s" remains. A similar thing is seen in the word "bourgeois" which is phonemically produced /ˈbʊdʒwaː/ with the spelling uncompromisingly faithful to the source of the language. Webster attributes part of the often cited discrepancies between spelling and sound in English to the popular tendency to abbreviate words of common use in line with the habit of quick pronunciation. This habit gives rise to the pronunciation of words such as colonel /kɔːnl/, library as /laibri/. Brown (1990), clearly states that the existence of dialects raises a problem for the students wishing to learn English. The Students are confused about the form of spoken English they should imitate because they obviously cannot imitate them all. They wonder if they should try to speak like the Scot or like an Irish, like the English from Yorkshire or like one from Devon. He however, makes it clear that:

> *No type of English can be said to be intrinsically better than other, nor can any type of English be termed. We mean a kind of English which has received the official approval of some authoritative body.*

Onuigbo (1990), notes that there is an inconsistent relationship between the written symbols and the sounds of the English language. In the English language, for example, the written symbols "ou" can be rendered in several ways in the oral speech act. The words:

'

- thou' is produced as /aʊ/

'

- though' is produced /əʊ/

'

- thought is produced /ɔː/

'

- through is produced /uː/

The implication of the above problem to students is that they find it difficult to differentiate the various uses of a sound such as the ones above because there are such discrepancies in their own mother tongue. This explains better why a student may pronounce /e-we/ instead of /juː/ for the word "ewe". Jayanthi (2015), opines that grammarians concern themselves chiefly with language as it appears in print. He contends that how to use the language is of much more valuable than its analysis. He adds that the oral speech work must rank equal with the formal and literary forms. In most cases, teachers-in-charge of English neglect the oral sound of English.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the findings of this research work, the following conclusions and recommendations were made: 1.The problems of oral production of speech sounds are the most difficult aspect of the English language. 2. Most of the schools have no language laboratories or

equipment to help the teaching and learning of English grammar. Furthermore, the research also shows that the problems of oral production of speech sounds experienced by the learners of English as a second language were mostly caused by their phonetic knowledge and phonological competence, besides vocabulary, lexical and syntactical knowledge.

Phonetics and Phonology have always been the foundation blocks for proper development of linguistic analysis. In this development, speech sounds are arranged into morphemes or syllables and in the grammatical rank scale, the morphemes operate in the structure of the word, the word in the group, the group in the clause and the clause in the sentence which is the largest unit. But the interest which this work tries to pursue is the problems of oral production of speech sounds in English. The results of the findings also show that learners of English as a second language encounter a lot of problems in oral production of speech sounds in English. This finding suggests that learners are not taught properly by teachers-in-charge of English. And this could be as a result of lack of language laboratories or equipment in schools. Therefore, teachers do not have the required equipment to practice oral English effectively in the school with the students. The finding also shows that teachers – in – charge of English themselves are not properly taught in Oral English while in school.

Recommendations

In view of the problems under study and based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested: Teachers-in-charge of English should train students in speech skills. They should give students more oral drills in the classroom. Teachers should also organize debates

on various topics for students. The production of oral speech sounds is important for good speech. Learners should be taught how to find words and how the sounds of these words are articulated using good dictionaries such as Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and Advanced Learner's Dictionary. We are now in computer age, and so teachers should try and improvise teaching aids to help them in teaching oral skills in English. For instance, they may bring taped speeches in good English to the class as models. Students should form the habit of reading not only their texts, but also magazines and novels. This will improve their oral English tremendously. Government should provide language laboratories for schools as well as films on literature texts. Oral English should be included in the school curriculum and also be reflected in the school time table as a separate subject. Seminars and workshops should be organized for teachers of the English language to enable them to improve on their teaching and to keep them abreast of changes since English is dynamic in nature. The researcher is of the belief that if the above recommendations are implemented, the standard of Oral English will improve considerably.

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