

Review

Pronunciation challenges of open and distance learning students in the B.A English programme at the National Open University of Nigeria

Theodore Iyere

National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos.

Accepted 6 June, 2013

This paper analyzes some pronunciation challenges of English learners newly admitted into the B.A English programme at the National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos. It was discovered that factors leading to these problems are interference of the students' mother tongue, their ages, attitudes and their insufficient knowledge of sounds and the sound system of English. From this study, we could reiterate that having a clear understanding of the distinctions between phonetics as the general science of speech sounds and phonology as the sounds systems of particular languages can help to clarify what it is we have to deal with when we teach and learn pronunciation in the Open and Distance Learning environment. In the course of this study, it was subsequently discovered that the contrastive analysis of the target language and the learners' Mother Tongue can greatly facilitate the second language acquisition. This is why we advocated that it is necessary to make learners in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system know the phonological differences between their languages and English and consciously compare the two languages themselves during the learning process. From the various observations acquired through this study, we postulated that in order to learn English well, the second language teachers and learners in the ODL system should pay attention to the need to learn English pronunciation effectively.

Key words: Mother tongue interference, pronunciation, English sound system, open and distance learning (ODL).

INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication in everyday life. Many speakers of English in Nigeria have little understanding as regards the ability to speak the language as significantly as linguists do. Most times, many of these speakers of English in Nigeria just take it for granted and think that speaking and understanding is as natural as breathing. Consequently, many English learners prefer learning "DUMB ENGLISH" to paying attention to studying English pronunciation, the results being that learners are shocked whenever they meet

difficulties in oral communication.

Among many other factors, the most prominent is phonetics, which, to a large extent, weakens the learner's confidence both in speaking and listening. In the case of some senior students at the university, a reasonable accuracy in the pronunciation of individual sounds should certainly have been achieved, however, many students still fail to attain perfection.

The newly admitted undergraduate students, it has been observed, are comparatively quiet and shy, which

works to their disadvantage in speaking. They are afraid of making mistakes. They feel uncomfortable in their first attempt at speech in English and they are afraid of failure, laughter and ridicule – hence, their willingness to communicate in Pidgin English. These observations that analyse the fact that limited pronunciation skills can easily undermine a learner's self-confidence restrict his/her social interaction, and negatively influence estimations of their credibility and abilities are not new (Morley, 1998).

The ability to speak simple, correct and comprehensible English embodies the correctness of pronunciation and intonation and directly affects the appropriateness of communication in conversations.

Pronunciation instruction tends to be linked to the instructional method being used. In the grammar-translation method of the past, pronunciation was almost irrelevant and therefore seldom taught. In the audio-lingual method, learners spent hours in the language lab listening to and repeating sounds and sound combinations. It became popular in the 1950s.

This involved a systematic presentation of the structures of the second language, moving from the simple to the more complex. This approach was strongly influenced by a belief using of a lot of practice mechanically and repeatedly. At the time, "foreign-language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation" (George, 2002).

Occasionally, it would be hard to find a linguist who would agree with the statement, yet versions of the audio-lingual method are still very commonly used in language learning. With the emergences of more holistic, communication methods and approach to ESL instruction, pronunciation is addressed within the context of real communication. Although there are different versions of how to create 'communicative' experiences in the L2 Open and Distance Learning (ODL) classroom, they are based on a view that the functions of language (what it is used for) should be emphasized rather than the forms of the language (correct grammatical structure).

FACTORS INFLUENCING PRONUNCIATION IN THE ODL CLASSROOM

There are several factors that influence the pronunciation of the L2 learners. That is, the first language interference - interference of the learner's mother language, learner's age, learner's psychological attitude, prior pronunciation instruction, and the insufficient language knowledge of English phonology and phonetics.

Interference of ODL students' Mother Tongue with English

Most researchers agree that the learner's first language

influences the pronunciation of the target language and is a significant factor in accounting for foreign accents. So called interference or interference from the first language is likely to cause errors in aspiration, stress, and intonation in the target language. Many Nigerian students tend to have difficulty with English sounds because they are deeply influenced by similar sounds in their various languages. A particular sound which does not exist in the Mother Tongue can therefore, pose some difficulty for the second language learners to produce. Many students actually substitute those sounds with similar ones in their mother tongues. These sounds include both vowels and consonants. For example, there are no vowels like /æ/, /əu/, and /ʌ/, etc. or no such consonants as /ð/, /θ/. Therefore learners have trouble first of all in perceiving these sounds, and consequently trying to find nearest equivalents to substitute those new sounds. A typical example will be the substitution of /s/ or /z/ for the English /ð/, /ʒ: / or / ʒ / for the English /ʌ/ as in the word 'cup'. As it has been observed, a sound may actually exist in the students' Mother Tongue but the place of articulation and the manner of articulation of the sound in English and the student's mother tongue may be completely different.

The erroneous substitution takes place here as well. For instance, the English /ʌ/ and /ɜ:/ are very different from the Nigerian /e/ and /ɔ/. Therefore it is not surprising when the words 'bus', 'shirt', 'nurse' and 'world' are uncomfortably heard when they are produced by many ODL learners. A sound may exist in the mother tongue of the student, but not as separate phonemes: that means, the learner may not perceive it as a distinct sound that makes difference to meaning.

In most Nigerian languages, the sound /i/ exists, but whether the vowel is long or short does not make any difference in meaning, while the English phonemes /i:/ and /i/ differs a lot in meaning as in the word 'sheep' and 'ship'. The result is that many students in the Nigerian ODL classroom are not naturally aware of the differences in English sounds and the sounds of their languages. Interestingly, they may not even hear that difference. On the whole the two problems are more difficult. A totally new sound is often easily perceived as alien, and once you can hear a sound you are well on the way to being able to pronounce it. But if you cannot hear it then you cannot even attempt to pronounce it, and the problem of perception needs to be overcome before any progress can be made with articulation.

The combination of different phonemes differs in the English language and many Nigerian languages. In Hausa, for instance, the sound /f/ is articulated as /p/. Negatively transferring this character of Hausa phonological rules to English, learners would commonly pronounce words like 'father' and 'pupil' as /pazer/ and /fufil/, and will definitely have problems in pronouncing words 'prompt' and 'thousandths'.

Nigerian Languages are tonal and syllable-timed, while English is a stress-timed language and therefore they

have a great deal of differences in stress and rhythmic patterns. The basis for rhythm in any Nigerian language is the number of syllables, and the production of every syllable virtually takes the same amount of time, while the basis for English rhythm is that of stress and the stressed syllable takes more time to pronounce. With no knowledge of this significant feature, many Nigerian students learning English in the ODL classroom often find it difficult to clearly articulate every English syllable and word in speeches. This results in a 'foreign-sounding' accent, and possibly misunderstanding.

Another difference between Nigerian languages and English is that most or even all Nigerian languages are tonal, while English is an intonation language. Intonation transfer from the second language learners' L1 to L2 is a natural phenomenon.

The distinctive system of pronunciation and intonation of many Nigerian languages as compared to English may sometimes cause these languages to be perceived as rude and inconsiderate. More serious intonation transfer may even affect comprehension of the spoken message. Nigerian students coming into the university system to study English must be aware of this distinction in order to avoid making errors in intonation.

Of course, the utterances in many Nigerian languages have intonation as well and the intonation also sometimes falls on the ending words. However, every word in a local Nigerian language has a fixed tone - thus the intonation of the whole sentence must be greatly constrained, and the intonation is actually a slight variation on the basis of the word tone. On the other hand, for English, intonation can mean 'life and death' as regards comprehensible speech.

Some phoneticians vividly compare vowels and consonants as the body of English and intonation as the spirit of it. Some linguists claim that the important thing is not what you say but how you say it, thus placing much emphasis on intonation. There is no doubt that the knowledge of intonations and the perception of functions of different intonation patterns will facilitate learners' acquisition of the target language phonological system in great measure.

There are so many languages in Nigeria, and different local accents will cause trouble in learning English. For example, students from the Yoruba speaking areas of the country often have trouble in distinguishing /ʃ/ with /tʃ/ in the words 'cash' and 'catch' and /θ/ and /ð/ in 'thin' and 'this'. The words are very likely to be pronounced as 'tin' and 'dis'. It is important to note these pronunciation problems are evident in the speeches of almost all the students interviewed, irrespective of the part of the country they came from.

ERRORS OF STRESS IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

It has been observed that learners of Spoken English in

the ODL system make mistakes in the stress of words and rhythm of sentence. Unlike many other languages, English requires that one syllable in each word be stressed more than others. The importance of putting the stress on the right syllable in English words cannot be underestimated; putting the stress on the wrong syllable is more likely to make a word unintelligible than is mispronouncing one of its sounds. The result can certainly be attributed to the mother tongue interference. For many students whose pronunciations are especially hard to understand, misplaced syllable stress is one of the main problems. A change in the stress pattern of a word will change its sounds as well. One word that is stressed differently would have different grammatical functions and different meanings. For example, the word 'subject' has the stress on the first syllable when it is a noun, on the second when it is a verb, and this makes a noticeable difference to the sound of the vowels as well as the meanings of the word.

English speech rhythm is characterized by tone-units: a word or a group of words, which carries one central stressed syllable (other syllables, if there are any, are lightened). In English sentences, not all words are given equal emphasis. Key words (usually the words that contain new or important information) are stressed and pronounced more slowly and clearly than other words. Take for example, the question "Are you going to go to Ikeja?" If the focus of the question is on where the listener will go, the word "Ikeja" will be pronounced clearly with more emphasis. If, in contrast, the emphasis is on who is going, the sentence would sound like "Are YOU going to Ikeja?" The point being made here is that while students do not necessarily need to learn to reduce the unimportant words in sentence, they need to learn how to stress key words in given utterances. Other words should receive less strength since they are only the words used to link the sentence together. However, from the test items administered to some respondents, we observed that most of the newly admitted students in the university often stressed every word in the sentences they were given to read aloud.

Intonation factor in the target language

Intonation, the rise and fall in tone that makes the 'tune' of an utterance, is an important aspect of pronunciation of English, often making a difference to meaning or implication (Chen, 1983). Stress, for example, is most commonly indicated not by increased volume but by a slight rise in intonation. Intonation patterns in English sentences primarily indicate the degree of certainty of an utterance, that is, whether it is a statement, question or suggestion. Most questions in rising intonation, however, Wh- questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how) end with falling intonation. It is important for students to learn these patterns not only to be able to communicate

meaningfully, but also to avoid unwittingly sounding rude or indecisive.

Learners' age

It is believed that children seem to pick up accents very quickly; and the ability to do so seems to diminish with age. Interestingly, it was also discovered during the course of this study that the new ODL students' knowledge of their native languages to a large extent, acts as annoying interference with their effort at learning English as their second language. Meanwhile, pronunciation is considered to be the most difficult part of a language for adult learners to master. The question then is: Why is it that the younger the learner is, the easier it is to learn a second or foreign language? One important reason is that, younger learners are able to learn the sound system more effectively, while the learning process of adult learners may be more likely to be hindered because of their age. This study found out that the average age of a newly admitted ODL student in the National Open University was 19.

The debate over the impact of age on language acquisition and specifically pronunciation is varied. Some researchers argue that, after puberty, lateralization (the assigning of linguistic functions to the different brain hemisphere) is completed, and adults' ability to distinguish and produce native-like sounds is more limited. Others refer to the existence of sensitive periods when various aspects of language acquisition occur, or to adults' need to re-adjust existing neural networks to accommodate new sounds. Most researchers, however, agree that adults find pronunciation more difficult than children do and that they probably will not achieve native-like pronunciation. Yet experiences with language learning and the ability to self-monitor, which come with age, can offset these limitations to some degree.

LEARNERS' ATTITUDE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Attitude towards the target language learning can influence achievement in pronunciation. It is not common to find that quite a few students resist coordination with teachers in phonetics classes. Sometimes some other students pronounced separate phoneme uncorrected, these students laughed at them. That needs a correct attitude to learn English pronunciation. A number of researchers have claimed that work on pronunciation should need to be tied in with on the individual's value set, attitudes and socio-schemata (Pennington, 1994). Sometimes, motivation for learning can accelerate the learners' attitude formation. Attitude for learning can either support or hinder pronunciation skills development.

Similarly, the study also found out that the way an

individual pronounces has much to do with his or her personality and psychological or emotional state at a given time. Acton (1984) sees "preparing students psychologically as a necessary correlate to improving their pronunciation. Phonology, he says, has both 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' dimension which function in a kind of loop: 'Not only does personality or emotional state show in pronunciation... but the converse is also true: speakers can control their nerves or inner states by speaking properly'. This is the basic tenet of successful programmes in voice training and public speaking.'

Students' background knowledge of good pronunciation techniques

It is a well known fact that prior experiences with pronunciation instructions or techniques can influence the learners' success with current efforts. Learners at higher language proficiency levels may have developed habitual, systematic pronunciation errors that can be identified. As we know, the first impression is very important in every occasion. During the administration of our test instruments, we observed that some students failed to pronounce some words correctly from the beginning.

Our postulation therefore is that as these students become accustomed to their own version of pronunciation, they would be more likely to mis-comprehend when English words are not correctly pronounced. It is also worth mentioning that it was observed that the most often misunderstood words are those pronounced similarly. Such as, sheep, ship and house, horse etc. This clearly validates the fact that Nigerian students need to have a good habit of learning correct pronunciation at the beginning of their educational career.

PRESENTATION OF FACTS FROM THE STUDY

In the course of this study, it was discovered that the contrastive analysis of the target language and the learners' native language can greatly facilitate the second language acquisition. This is why we advocated that it is necessary to make learners in ODL system know the differences between their languages and English and consciously compare the two languages themselves during the learning process.

Phonetic differences vs. phonological differences

From this study, we can reiterate that the distinction between phonetics as the general science of speech sounds and phonology as the sounds systems of particular languages has helped to clarify what it is we have to deal with when we teach and learn pronunciation: that is, the physiology of producing speech sounds on the

one hand, and on the other, the specific system of distinctive sound features which characterize the target language (Fromkon and Rodman, 1993). Both disciplines have a contribution to make to pronunciation teaching. But the distinction between them has made it clearer that the learning of new sounds requires relearning movements of the vocal tract and that learning a new pronunciation is to a large extent physiological and learning a new pronunciation is to a large extent physiological and neuromuscular. In this respect, pronunciation teaching is 'more like gymnastics than linguistics' (Streven, 1997).

However, because of the fluidity of the speech movements themselves and the different proportions of the vocal tract utilized in different individuals, the movements that create the sounds cannot be described with absolute precision, let alone prescribed in detail. The postures demanded for each segment should be regarded as an idealization of real speech movements, which are made differently by different individuals. What we learn in learning the pronunciation of the target language is a system of relationships among different sounds.

Traditionally, the focus of early stages of pronunciation teaching is the isolated phoneme. The consequence of this focus is that learners still do not pronounce correctly in words or sentences even if they have acquired those phonemes accurately in isolation. In fact, isolated sounds are an abstraction, and in actual speech, sounds are produced in a continuous chain in which each individual sound is influenced by proceeding as well as subsequent movements. For example, in English the [-nasal] value of phonemic vowels is changed to [+nasal] phonetically through a spreading process when the vowels occur before nasals.

CONCLUSION

From the various observations acquired through this

study, we can postulate that in order to learn English well, the second language teachers and learners in the ODL system should pay attention to the need to learn English pronunciation effectively. The factors highlighted above that can easily influence the new ODL students' pronunciation of English. These factors are the first language interference - interference of mother tongue, the learners' age, attitude, psychological factor and prior pronunciation instruction and the learners' insufficient knowledge of phonology and phonetics. They will always, to a large extent, affect the students' effective acquisition of English pronunciation. On the other hand, it is also important for ODL tutors to endeavour to highlight the interesting distinctions between Nigerian languages and English phonological systems because it will raise the students' awareness of the differences of the two sound systems to avoid errors in pronunciation. Imitation, listening and speaking, reading aloud are good suggestions for pronunciation improvement of English learners in the ODL system. Certainly, there is a long way for learners of English pronunciation in the Open and Distance Learning system to go.

REFERENCES

- Acton W (1984). Changing Fossilized Pronunciation. *TESOL Q.* (1):69-83.
- Chen W (1983). *Structures and functions of English Intonation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Teaching www.melta.org.my/ET/1992/main6.htm/.
- Fromkon V, Rodman A (1993). *An Introduction to Language*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- George Y (2002). *The Study of Language (Second edition)*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Pennington MC (1994). *Recent Research in L2 Phonology: Implications for Practice*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Streven P (1997). *New Orientations in the Teaching of English*. London: Oxford University Press.