

Implications of Sound-Letter Ambiguity of English Consonants to Second Language Learners

BY

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Abstract

English spelling is not always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for. The study investigates the influence of sound-letter ambiguity of English consonants on some Nigeria undergraduates. Data for the study were gathered using recorded pronunciation exercise. Through a simple random technique, a total of thirty (30) English undergraduates of 2016/2017 session who have studied spoken English and Phonetics and Phonology in their two hundred (200) levels were purposively selected from Madonna University, Nigeria, Okija and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The paper anchors on Stephen Corder's theory of error analysis as its theoretical framework. Using textual analysis, both qualitative and quantitative analysis were employed in analyzing the data. The study reveals that students face a lot of difficulty pronouncing some English consonant sounds, due to lack of one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds. Again, students are ignorant of the fact that some consonants letters change to vowel sounds in speech and vice-versa. They are ignorant of the phonological conditioning of some plural and past tense markers. Based on these findings, the study recommends that an adequate study drills should be given to the students on the learning of consonant sounds especially on those ones that are non-existent in our indigenous languages.

Key words: Consonant sounds, letters, ambiguity, faulty pronunciation, communication breakdown.

Introduction

Inconsistencies in English at the level of orthography and phonology are numerous. This is because ordinary English spelling is very far from being an adequate system for transcription. The influence of speaking is very strong in students who are speakers of English as a second language. Language is the only means of communication and if the aim of communication is jeopardized by one factor or the other, there will be a breakdown in communication. Simply put, speech is the basic for language hence, it should be accurately emphasized. This is because without some degree of accuracy, the speaker could end up pronouncing incomprehensible or unrecognizable language. This vividly confirms that "Speeches and pronunciations of words in English are seldom 'flat'" (David Okoroafor, 2012:3). Different spellings may have the same sound and be represented by one symbol. There is no definite relationship between the spellings of words and their pronunciation in English. Okoroafor continues that we tend to deduce the pronunciation of many English words from other words we 'know better'; such words could be English or our mother tongues. One spelling can have different sounds and symbols in different words. For instance, 'C' sounds differently in the

following words: car /ka:/, centre /sentə/. Speech is one area that carries the identity of the speaker in a way that writing does not. In view of this, there has been the question of what model of pronunciations to adopt. Although, the Received Pronunciation (RP) is often regarded as the universal standard for General Minimum Intelligibility, there are arguments as to whether RP is intrinsically better than the other standards.

Research Question

1. In what ways do sound-letter ambiguities pose a challenge to learners of English as a second language?
2. What strategies could be employed for better pronunciation?

Definition of Concepts

It is worthy to define some concepts for better understanding of the work.

Phonetics – “The general study of the characteristics of speech sounds” (Yule, 1998: 41).

Sound – “Minimal segment of a spoken language” (The New Penguin English Dictionary (2001: 1372).

Letter – “A character representing one or more of the sounds used in speech” Concise Oxford Dictionary (1999: 815).

Consonants

“Consonants are speech sounds produced when the airflow through the mouth is partly or completely obstructed at one or more points” (David Okoroafor, 2012:29).

Literature Review

The English Sound System

While the English sound system has forty-four standard speech sounds (vowels and consonants), the alphabet has only twenty-six letters. Since there are more phonemes than there are letters of the English alphabet, letters are insufficient in number for the representation of all phonemes. Okoroafor (2012: 14) asserts that “... although some phonemes can be represented by symbols similar in writing to some letters of the English alphabet, they do not mean the same thing in phonetics.” On this, Sethi, Sadanand and Jindal unanimously confirm thus:

“While English has 44 sounds the alphabet has only 26 letters. So, the alphabet is overburdened. And worst still, even in the face of a scarcity of letters, many of them are sometimes squandered in representing the same sound” (11).

The implication of the above is little or no mastery of the vowel sounds as it imposes more confusion on the learners.

The Consonant Sounds

The use of consonant sounds offers more to the understanding of English than the vowels do. In fact, consonants constitute the bones of the English words. “They are the skeleton around which English words are formed as they give words their basic shapes” (Joy Eyisi, 2007:69). In definition, consonant sounds are speech sounds which are produced when the airstream from the lungs is completely or partially obstructed at a particular point in the oral cavity. Eyisi (2007:70) says, “... they are twenty-four in number and are usually classified based on three major factors.” They are:

- i. The place or point of articulation
- ii. The state or position of glottis
- iii. The manner of articulation

This is further described in the chart below:

The place of Articulation	The State of Glottis		The Manner of Articulation
Bilabial Alveolar Velar	Voiced	Voiceless	Plosives or stop consonants
	b a g	p t k	
Labio-dental Dental Alveolar Palato-alveolar Glottal	V ð z ʒ H	f θ s ʃ	Fricatives
Palato-Alveolar	ʃ ʒ	tʃ	Affricates
Alveolar	R		Liquids
Alveolar	L		Lateral
Bilabial Palatal	w j		or semi-
Bilabial Alveolar Velar	m n ŋ		Nasals

The consonant chart of English

The Origin of Ambiguity

English vowels' ambiguity evolved from different sources.

Some of them include: historical reasons, silent letters, the introduction of printing, the French scribes spelling of Old English, Roman Missionaries writing of OE, borrowing.

The French Scribes' Spelling of Old English

After the Norman Conquest, the French Scribes brought their own ideas about spelling. Several Old English (OE) spellings were replaced. David Crystal (1998:75) gathers that

The French introduced 'q' where OE had used 'CW' as in 'queen'. French Scribes brought in 'gh' instead of 'h' in such words as 'night' 'enough' and 'ch' in place of 'c' in such words as 'church'. They began to use 'ou' for 'u' in words like 'house'. They used 'c' before 'e' or 'i' in such words like 'circle, cell. Because the 'u' was written in a similar way to 'm, n and v', words containing a sequence of these letters became difficult to read. Thus, they often replaced the 'u' with 'o' in such words as 'love, come, son, and one.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, English spelling was a mixture of two systems: French and Old English.

The Introduction of Printing

The early fifteenth century witnessed several ways of spelling words, reflecting regional variations in pronunciation. The introduction of Printing Press in 1476 by William Caxton helped to develop a standard form of English spelling and pronunciation. This provided more opportunities for people to write and give their works much wider circulation. By the sixteenth century, English language was developing both in the text and in a growing number of observations dealing with the grammar, vocabulary and writing system. However, Caxton as well as other publishers faced the problem of uniformity of the writing system and had to distinguish between what was standard and non-standard. They chose the system of which reflected the speech of the London area as standard to follow in printing houses.

Silent Letters

The changes undergone by English for many years caused some letters to be silent at certain positions in words. For instance; the letter 'k' in words such as 'knee', 'knight' and others was pronounced in OE but it is not the case today. Similarly, the final 'e' of 'state' 'rice', 'fire', etc. was still pronounced in the Middle English period but later on become silent. The 'r' of 'fire', 'beer', 'air' was pronounced in all accents of English till the eighteenth century. While all these changes took place in speech, spelling, however, remained stable.

Borrowing

English language borrows extensively from other languages. This fact has been acknowledged by many writers including Yule. He avers: "... the English language has adopted a vast number of loan words from other languages ..." (1996:65). These brought about un-English looking spelling words which ended in strange combinations of vowels and consonants. Some of these borrowing include:

Arabic – alcohol, algebra, coffee

Dutch – boss, trek, wagon

French – ménu, café, résumé

Italian – piano, music, opera

German – pretzel, ubermensch, gratteciel

Turkish – yogurt, superman

Japanese – tycoon

Spanish – cargo, picaresque, cigar

Danish – leg, fellow, skip **Greek Affixes Include:** demos –

democracy phone – telephone grapho – orthography **Latin Affixes**

Include: aqua – aquatic annus - annual corpus – corporal

Mother Tongue (MT) Influence

“The term mother tongue is the only language of a monolingual person which is acquired naturally in his native environment and which meets all his linguistics need” (Afolayan 1988) in Femi (Akindele and Wale Adegbite, 2005: 48). Most Nigerian languages are tonal in nature and so, follow a simple straightforward system sound whereas English pronunciation and orthography are based on phonemic segmentation and so, has various spelling variants (A.F Obi- Okoye, 2008:180) for instance, *ázíza*’ unlike the English word ‘card’ which is pronounced /ka:d/. This poses a serious challenge to learners of English as a second language.

Theoretical Framework Error Analysis

The paper hinges on the theory of Error Analysis (EA). The assumption that second language learners (L2) errors are caused by negative Interlingua interference from their mother tongue (MT) has been long disputed. The criticism has been that Interlingua interference from first language (L1) is not the only source of error in L2. Thus, Error Analysis, as propounded by Stephen Corder in 1970 becomes a better approach to describe L2 learners’ errors. The definition of EA as given by C. James (1981:1) says that “EA is the process of determining the incident, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessfully language.” Hence, EA upholds that negative interference from MT is not the only source of errors in L2; there are other sources of errors. In view of this, two sources of errors are listed under EA. They are interlinguas (that is those caused by the effect of the learner’s MT or the learning of the target language) and intralingua (errors caused from the effect of the learning of the target language).

The importance of EA cannot be overstressed. It is useful in evaluating the undesirable status of errors so as to serve a guide to inner workings of the language teaching and learning process.

Methodology

The population of the study includes a sample of 30 300 level undergraduate students of English of Madonna University, Nigeria, Okija and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka who have studied Spoken English as a course in their 200 level. Proximity played a role use as the researchers are lecturers in the Department of English, Madonna University, Nigeria, Okija. In addition, one of the researchers is a post graduate student of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The study employed a survey research design. The study is suitable because it studies a group and not the entire 300 level students of the selected schools. Data were collected using recorded pronunciation test and the scores gathered were used in the interpretation of data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this paper consist of oral English performance of 300 level students of the above two selected schools. A total number of fifteen words with target consonant sounds at different positions written on foolscap were given to each student to pronounce. This was tape recorded and analysed. To ascertain the correctness of each of the words analysis was carried out.

Our aim was to find out if students would be able to identify similar or different sounds represented by different letters in different words. Students were also tested on silent letters, those that have consonant letters and pronounced as vowels. We also gave them a few words in the past tense and plural markers to pronounce. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were employed in the analysis of data. The method used is presented below:

The frequency (f) for each answer chosen over total participants (T) multiplied by hundred.

Simply put: $\frac{f}{T} \times 100 = \%$

B Written Exercise 1

Identify a word in each of the options below, which contains a different sound from the others.
Example: a. Psalm, b. Pest, c. Palm, d. past

The correct answer is a

1.	a. Europe usage b. yatch under c. d.	a. short shoe shop b. c. d. silk
3.	a. rest b. wreck wrath c. watch d.	a. lamb womb b. club tomb c. d
5.	a. haste b. honey c. hour d. heavy	

Written Exercise II

Indicate the consonant at the initial position in each of the following words: Write the correct symbol.

Example:

Word Initial consonant	Word Initial consonant
Psalm /s/	Psalm /s/
6. cough	7. physics
8. shop	9. church

10. yes	
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Written Exercise III

Indicate the consonant at the final position in each of the following words: Write the correct symbol.

Example:

Word Final consonant	Word Final consonant
Semesters /z/	Semesters /z/
11. tomb	12. letters
13. breathe	14. kicked
15. of	

Written Exercise IV

From the words lettered A – D, choose the word that contains the consonant sound represented by the phonetic symbol.

Example: /k/ a. know b. knot c. known d. klin

16. /f/ a. bad cough b. boast though c. d.	17. /dʒ/ a. procedure pleasure boys wash b. c. d.
18. /k/ knot six a. know b. let c. d.	19. /tʃ/ a. true cheap cap theme b. c. d.
20. /ʒ/ a. vision b. church c. lace d. gin	

Methodology

The researchers collected data from a pronunciation test which was administered to all 400 level undergraduate students of the English Department of Madonna University, Okija Campus. The pronunciation survey was carried out in the language laboratory of the Department between the periods of October 2017 to April 2019. This was the period they studied the two related courses on English sounds; the courses are Spoken English, ENG 217 and Phonetics and Phonology, ENG 312 respectively.

In addition to oral test, written exercises were given to the students. A total number of 20 words consisting of various consonant sounds at different positions were administered to the students. Students were also tested on different phonetic symbols.

Date Presentation and Analysis

In carrying out this research, all 50 final year English students who were admitted into the noble university in 2016 took part in the exercise. 20 words were given to the students to pronounce. The pronunciation was tape-recorded and analyzed. The words contain consonant sounds at various positions, some silent letters, plural noun markers, past tense markers, consonant letters pronounced as vowels sounds. In addition, they were given some phonetic symbols to identify. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were employed in the analysis of data. The method used is presented below:

The frequency (f) for each answer chosen over total participants (T) multiplied by hundred. Simply put $\frac{f}{T} \times 100 = \%$

Table 1

	Words	RP	No of students	No of Correct pronunciati	%	No of incorrect pronunciati	
1	Schedule	/ʃedju:l/	50	10	50%	20	50%
2	Imbecile	/Imbəs:l/	50	0	0%	20	100%
3	Kicked	/kIkt/	50	0	0%	20	100%
4	Started	/sta:tɪd/	50	0	0%	20	100%
5	Exam	/Igzæm	50	0	0%	20	100%
6	Files	/faɪlz/	50	2	10%	18	90%
7	Newspaper	/nju:zpeɪpə	50	4	20%	16	80%
8	Wednesd	/wenzdeɪ/	50	5	25%	15	15%
	ay						
9	Boys	/bɔɪz/	50	0	0%	20	100%
10	Course	/kɔ:s/	50	20	100%	0	0%
11	Cause	/kɔ:z/	50	0	0%	20	100%
12	Comb	/kəʊm/	50	10	50%	10	50%

1 3	Tank	/tæŋk/	50	20	100 %	0	0%
1 4	Thank	/θæŋk/	50	6	30%	14	70%
1 5	Dough	/dəu/	50	20	100 %	0	0%
1 6	Though	/dəu/	50	8	40%	12	60%
1 7	Of	/əv/	50	0	0%	20	100%
1 8	Hair	/heə/	50	20	100 %	0	100%
1 9	Heir	/eə/	50	6	30%	14	70%
2 0	is	/Iz/	50	52	10%	18	90%

Looking at the above table, we can discover that only 10 out of 50 students giving 50% got the correct pronunciation of ‘schedule’. In a similar manner, only 10 students (50%) equally could correctly pronounce the word ‘comb’. This shows that the students do not have the knowledge of silent letters in the study of English consonant sounds. No student could correctly pronounce the words; ‘imbecile’, ‘started’, ‘boys’, ‘exam’. ‘cause’. and ‘of’ respectively.

They, therefore, recorded 0%. This vividly shows students poor pronunciation of both past tense and plural noun markers respectively. Students are also ignorant of the change in the pronunciation of some consonant letters such as ‘of’/əv/, ‘cause’/kɔ:z/, ‘is’/Iz/ and so on.

In the word ‘newspaper’, only 4 students (16%) could correctly pronounce it, where only 5 students (25%) could give the correct pronunciation of the word, ‘Wednesday’. For the words ‘course’, ‘tank’, ‘dough’ as well as hair, all the students recorded 100% correct pronunciation respectively. Again, only 6 students (30%) could correctly pronounce the words ‘thank’ and ‘heir’ respectively. Looking further, only 8 students (40%) could give the correct pronunciation of the word ‘though’. Also, it is equally vivid that only 2 students (10%) could give the correct pronunciation of the word ‘is’.

From the above general analysis of the oral recorded test, it is obvious that students have poor pronunciation of English consonant sounds up to higher level and thereafter. The researchers say so because all the students used for this exercise have all undertaken the two required courses in the English sound in their 200 and 300 levels respectively and now in their final year. These courses include: Spoken English, ENG 217 as well as Phonetics and Phonology, ENG 312.

Table 2 – Written Exercise

	Words	No of students	No of correct answers	% of correct answers	No of incorrect answers	% of incorrect answers
1	Under	50	2	40%	3	60%
2	Silk	50	5	100%	0	0%
3	Watch	50	5	1000%	0	0%
4	Club	50	2	40%	3	60%
5	Hour	50	4	80%	1	20%

	II					
6	/k/	50	5	100%	0	0%
7	/f/	50	5	100%	0	0%
8	/ʃ/	50	3	100%	2	40%
9	/tʃ/	50	3	60%	2	40%
10	/j/	50	0	60%	5	100%
	III					
11	/m/	50	0	100%	5	100%
12	/z/	50	0	100%	5	100%
13	/θ/	50	1	20%	4	80%
14	/t/	50	1	20%	4	80%
15	/v/	50	0	0%	5	100%
	IV					
16	/f/ as in cough	50	5	100%	0	0%
17	/dʒ/ as in procedure	50	4	80%	1	20%
18	/k/ as in six	50	3	60%	2	40%
19	/tʃ/ as in cheap	50	5	100%	0	0%
20	/ʒ/ as in vision	50	2	40%	3	60%

Analysis of Written Test 1

It is glaring from the table that the entire 50 students that participated in the written test recorded 100% correct in identifying different words from each group given. However, (40%) respectively were able to identify different words that contain a different sound for numbers 1 and 4 respectively. In addition 4(80%) of the students were able to identify a different sound from the group.

Going further in test II, where the students were expected to identify the consonant at the initial position of some given words, the entire students were able to correctly indicate the consonant at the initial words of numbers 6 and 7 respectively while 3 correct answers of 60% respectively were equally recorded in numbers 8 and 9.

Surprisingly, none of the students could indicate the initial consonant in the word “yes”. That gives a 0% to question number 10.

From test III, students were asked to indicate the consonant at the final position of some given words. Regrettably, no student could correctly identify the final consonants at the words ‘tomb’ and letters respectively. This obviously shows students poor knowledge of some silent letters as well as phonological variations of plural markers..

Similarly, 0(0%) of the students could correctly identify the final consonant at the two letter words ‘of’ and only 1 (20%) respectively could indicate the consonant at the final position of the words, ‘kicked’ and ‘breath’ respectively.

Looking at test IV, where the students were asked to choose the word that contains the consonant sound represented by the phonetic symbol, out of the 50 students used for the study, all the students supplied the correct, phonetic symbols to question numbers 16 and 19 respectively. For question number 17 students recorded 0% while question number 18 has 60%. The last question (20) has 2 (40%) correct answer.

Summary/Conclusion

The paper brings to limelight the challenges of sound – letter ambiguity of English consonants to Nigeria undergraduates' second language learners. The fact that English spelling is not always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for, is problematic to users of English as a second language.

Students at tertiary levels and beyond exhibit poor knowledge of English consonant sound system at different variations: silent letters, plural markers and change in sound. However, the acquisition of a good knowledge of English (sound) is a social, professional and economic asset to any individual who wishes to be successful. Students should therefore, endeavour to maintain consistent pronunciation practice using a good dictionary on pronunciation. Emphasis should be made on those sounds that are not in any of the Nigerian languages.

Recommendations for Improvement

In addition to giving students more drills on the general consonant sounds, students should study numerous examples provided for words in which they occur. Consistent pronunciation practice should be seriously maintained. Eyisi (2007:19) superbly summarizes this when she says; "wonderful opportunity and strength should be directed to the pronunciation of English sounds, particularly, those of them that are not incorporated in our sound system." Students should always be free to consult their teachers. Teachers on the other hand, should endeavour to make themselves available to students.

Again, students should endeavour to buy good dictionary of pronunciation. They should be up and doing in checking up words in the dictionary and they should equally emphasize both on the meaning and pronunciation of such words. In addition to buying a good dictionary, students should consider buying good books on Spoken English. On this again Eyisi asserts.

A good book on English pronunciation, therefore, when followed meticulously can serve as an indispensable vademecum to any learner who wishes to make success in Spoken English. Such a book when owned, read and used for practice can successfully liberate the learner from the 'tyranny' of pronunciation habit formed in acquiring the mother tongue. (2007:25).

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