

PROBLEMS IN PRONUNCIATION: A CASE STUDY OF ESL LEARNERS AT LEADS GROUP OF COLLEGES GUJRANWALA, PAKISTAN

Khalil Ahmad

MS Scholar, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan

Tanzeela Azam

Lecturer, Department of English, ILM College for Girls, Jauharabad, Pakistan

Ali Furqan Syed

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan

Hina Qayyum

MS Scholar, Department of English, University of Sialkot, Pakistan

Abstract

One's pronunciation significantly impacts the ability to get employment. Sometimes, students are graded unjustly if they cannot persuade others of their talents owing to wrong pronunciation or a lack of language proficiency. This is a result of their inability to explain their skills to others. Students must practice pronouncing words correctly, particularly those with poor oral communication skills. They will be able to deliver engaging talks, as a result, impressing prospective employers and enhancing their mobility. Recognizing the challenges students experience pronouncing words is the first step in finding a solution. This research aims to highlight the college students' problems in pronunciation at Leads Group of Colleges in Gujranwala, Pakistan, which often pronounce incorrectly while pronouncing English words. A sample of 25 students from the Higher Secondary School Certificate program at the Leads Group of Colleges in Gujranwala was purposefully chosen to meet the study's goals. The primary sources of data for this study carried out using the qualitative methodology were the short stories "Button Button" by Richard Matheson and "Clearing in the Sky" by Jesse Stuart, both of which were included in Text Book-1 for college students and were published by the Punjab Text Book Board, Pakistan. The results show that various variables, including phonetic ability, native language, previous exposure to English pronunciation, training, and motivation, contributed to the student's difficulty in pronunciation. One of these causes was the notion of a sound system difference between English and the mother tongue. The idea of a difference between English and the local language was one of many other reasons. There should be appropriate instructional methods, training, and seminars, and most importantly, students' interests should be piqued to address these pronunciation issues among Pakistani students.

Introduction

English as a second language is being taught for many years to students all over the world and in Pakistan. Learning English begins from childhood education in pre-school classes onward. Still, most students feel problems with English pronunciation throughout the educational period and even after completing the degree in professional and daily life as the everyday use of English speaking. Anyone interested in learning English as a Second Language knows very well that English is not a pretty complex phenomenon. Yet, it is very simple in terms of grammar and vocabulary at Intermediate level in Pakistan. Still, at a higher degree level, learners face complex forms of phonology, morphology and syntax as the difficulty they face is the correct use of pronunciation because of multiple factors.

Simply put, language is how we share our experiences with the world. People who aren't trained in linguistics often place less value on fluency in speech than linguists do. They consider language and comprehension to be as automatic as breathing. When learning a new language, it's essential to focus on many skills, including vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and public speaking (Zhang & Yin, 2009). Good pronunciation is essential for effective communication (Ellis, 1997). Students need to have a firm grasp of grammatical and lexical structures and how to correctly articulate those structures and words. Developing clear and correct pronunciation should also be a priority for students.

The ability to speak English accurately encapsulates precise pronunciation and intonation, which influences effective conversational communication. The approach used to teaching pronunciation is often correlated with the technique chosen. Pronunciation was not heavily prioritized in the traditional grammar-translation approach to language learning. According to the audio-lingual approach, students would spend long periods in a language

lab listening to recordings and practicing the sounds they heard. This trend took off in the '50s. The structures of the target language were presented systematically, beginning with the most elementary and progressing to the most complex. A firm conviction in the efficacy of plenty of mechanical, repeatable practice was a significant factor in shaping this method. That "learning a foreign language is essentially a mechanical process of habit development" was a common belief back then (George, 2002)

According to Zhang & Yin(2009), many obstacles make it hard for students to master proper English pronunciation. To begin, there are a variety of sounds in English that are unfamiliar to non-native speakers. In addition, the last sounds in English are pronounced utterly unlike the ones they have been exposed to their whole lives, making it harder for them to master proper English pronunciation. There have been reports of students making phonetic mistakes that render their English unintelligible, which may have a devastating effect on a student's confidence in both listening and speaking.

Students' English pronunciation issues also affected how they participated in class, how well they did on their midterms and finals, and their overall grade point averages. The purpose of this article is to investigate what contributes to students' difficulties with English pronunciation. As stated by (Yangklang, 2006), this article aims to connect readers with instructional resources and techniques for bettering students' pronunciation, including textbooks, tape recorders, TVs, exercises, drills, and multimedia.

Problem Statement

College Students at Leads Group of Colleges, Gujranwala, face pronunciation problems. Observations show some problems in speaking /p/ as /P^h/ and /t/ as /t^h/ in which h is aspirated. They should speak 'Pakistan' /Pekɪstæn/, but they pronounce /p^hækɪstæn/. Students also struggle to understand 'th' /θ/ in 'thanks' and /ðs/ in 'this.' There are more problems in vowels like 'gate' /geɪt/ and wait /weɪt/. Students perceive trouble understanding silent English words like 'often' /'ɒf(ə)n, 'ɒft(ə)n/ has both pronunciations. Sometimes 't' is silent (according to Google British pronunciation dictionary), and sometimes it has been voiced. This difference is not easy to understand. 'Soften' and 'hasten' have silent 't,' which is not pronounced. The misconception in education is quite simple because it is considered that only students are poor in English pronunciation as they cannot pronounce the correct pronunciation. This study highlights the major pronunciation problems faced by college students in Pakistan with empirical evidence.

Literature Review

Many linguists and studies on second language acquisition (SLA) concluded that the difficulties in pronouncing English among speakers of different languages are the same. Still, the problems vary according to the speaker's native language. Since Urdu is one of these languages, this article will examine some factors that affect learning a second language (L2), mainly English pronunciation. We will also attempt to identify the root reasons for these issues and look for practical strategies and insights that might help students better pronounce English. There has been much study in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) on the factors that impede non-native speakers, specifically Sudanese learners, from developing a level of linguistic proficiency equivalent to that of native speakers (O'Connor, 2003; Yule, 2003).

Researchers and linguists have highlighted some linguistic factors; these include the sound system differences between the mother tongue (L1) and the second language (L2), the inconsistency of some English sounds, interference from the mother tongue, and the influence of spelling on pronunciation. The sounds /p/ and /b/ are two separate phonemes, and a native speaker will be able to tell them apart (Moosa, 1972; Swan & Smith, 2001). Research in this area has focused on how second languages affect the acquisition of English. These investigations were written by Carter, J. C. (1977), Moosa (1972), and Swan & Smith (2001).

Recent research (Brown, 2000) found that there are difficulties for second language students. This is because, especially as a mature student, the learner's L1 impacts the L2 being acquired. Due to L1 transfer, this phenomenon is a major cause of mistakes made by foreign language students. Both Ladefoged (2001) and Carter and Nunan (2001) found that one's native language substantially affects how a second language is spoken. Learners of other languages sometimes make blunders while attempting to bridge the gap between the rules of their L1 and the L2. This might all be explained by a phenomenon known as L1 and L2 interference. Many pupils mispronounce the letter /b/ as the phonetic /p/, while others use /s/ for /z/, /z/ for /s/, and /b/ for /v/.

O'Connor (2003) and Yule (2003) investigate the influence of L1 on pronunciation and build on previous studies. The sounds /p/ and /b/, /s/ and /z/, /z/ and /s/, /t/ and /d/, and /v/ and /b/ are only a few of the many that are often confused with one another. Some common antonyms include "pit," "bit," "thin," "sin," "activity," and "very berry."

An individual's improper pronunciation of the sounds above may be the consequence of a fossilization process brought on by excessive usage of their native language. According to Yule and O'Connor (2003), the two most challenging aspects of English pronunciation are thought to be the construction of a new set of sounds that are

compatible with the sounds of English and the dismantling of an arrangement of sounds that has been firmly established due to the practices and systems of our LI. The adult voice is conditioned to give words a distinctive pronunciation.

This indicates that humans have perfected new communication methods through voice and hearing. Consequently, it is exceedingly difficult for a student to change habits that they have had from childhood, or that at least it takes a very long amount of time, in addition to a very long period and regular practice, all of which are connected to a certain age of the learner. The concept that learners mistake such noises and substitute each of them with other sounds that are believed to be the closest ones to them is shared by all of the aspects discussed up to this point (O'Connor, 2003).

Many academics and linguists have noted the incompatibility between the phonetic systems of a first language and a foreign language. According to Moosa (1972), English learners have difficulty differentiating between the sound systems of English and their language since they have formed habits of their mother tongue while learning English.

An investigation on the role of acoustic environments in the acquisition of pronunciation skills and pronunciation problems was published in 2014. The research confirmed that discrepancies between the English and native sound systems provide the most significant barrier to students learning and teaching English pronunciation Hassan, E. M. I. (2014).

It was said that different students' first languages would provide various obstacles to overcome while learning English as a second language (SLA). The differences between English and other language have a role in this (e.g., English and Urdu). These acoustic differences are seen as a hindrance to fluency in English pronunciation because the new sounds are still foreign to their speech organs, especially if they start learning English as an adult; however, it is anticipated that this issue can be resolved after a considerable amount of time spent engaging in consistent practice and exerting a great deal of effort. A word written in Urdu may be easily understood since each letter represents just one sound. In addition, unlike in English, there are no unarticulated (or silent) sounds. It has been found that when the sound systems of the LI and L2 are dissimilar, students are more prone to make errors when they seek to "translate" their native language's sounds into those of the second language (Nunan, 2001).

It may be calculated that there are forty-four phonemes in English, one for each of the language's twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels. While learning English, a learner should be able to produce all of these phonemes. Learners from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds may have some initial difficulty pronouncing them correctly owing to the differences in their language backgrounds (O'Connor, 2003).

According to Gimson, A. C. & Crutteden, A. (1994), each vowel sound in English may be spoken in several ways. Students of English all over the globe, and students of English in Sudan in particular, often find it challenging to master the language. This is among the most significant obstacles they must overcome. Because of this, students have a lot of trouble learning the language and often mispronounce it. It's important to note that those whose native languages have a more straightforward vowel system have a far greater struggle in developing the qualitative oppositions. The student errs by changing the quality or quantity of a given sound, so the student tends to use alternative sounds in certain words, such as son/s, while the proper sound would be the same quality and quantity.

The students, even at the university level, have trouble pronouncing particular words from written material, as shown by the researchers' notes and observations. As opposed to the Urdu language, in which pupils may readily pronounce a comment from a written text merely by looking at it, the English language has a spelling system that makes it difficult to discern between orthography and phonology. The English language has a large number of silent letters. According to (Yule, 2001), there is a significant discrepancy between the sounds of spoken English and their written counterparts. It is challenging to explain the sounds of a language like English if the letters of the alphabet cannot be used consistently to represent the sounds humans produce. Given that there are twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels in English assigning a unique letter to each of these 44 components is a foolproof technique to demonstrate how a pupil should pronounce a word. The challenge of spelling based on pronunciation may be easily sidestepped if the student is taught that each letter stands for a particular sound (e.g., an equal number of sounds to the letters).

Lead, for instance, is pronounced /li:d/ in a sentence like lead the way, and /led/ in another phrase like a lead pipe, even though they are both spelled the same way. The letters in the words rain, rein, and reign all have different spellings but the same pronunciation. The student who has not yet mastered the correct pronunciation of such phrases would likely mispronounce them when he reads their spellings (O'Connor, 2003).

Teachers should be aware that pupils can anticipate the pronunciation of words based on their spelling, thanks to the correspondence between orthography and phonology (Carter; Nunan, 2001). A pupil who doesn't acquire the proper pronunciation of words may mispronounce them based only on their spellings. For example, in the terms knee, know, knot, and knight, the k is silent before the n. Words like "campaign," "reign," "sign," and "gnash" all have a silent "g," yet most students mispronounce them because they expect the "g" to be voiced. This is just one example from (Easton, 2005) showing that words with silent letters may be problematic for pupils. However, in terms like "signal," "signature," and "resignation," the /g/ is pronounced; unless the student has a thorough grasp of the pronunciation of /g/ in such words, he will mistake its pronunciation.

However, foreign students should be aware that this letter is relatively faint and not pronounced in the same way as Urdu. It has been noticed that in most variants of British English, the letter (r) may only come before a vowel, as in the phrases "red," "ruler," and "riding" (Ladefoged, 2001). The remarks above show how language learners have commonly led astray when attempting to infer the proper pronunciation of words based merely on their spelling. This happens because children do not have a thorough knowledge of how words are uttered and the relationships between sounds and letters in the English language. They say "car" as they say it in their language, "arm" as they say it in their language, "horse" as they say it in their language, and "hurt" as they say it in their language if w is pronounced with an "r" (Gimson, A. C., & Crutteden, A., 1994).

Methodology

The study deals with pronunciation problems of the students at Leads Group of Colleges, Gujranwala, who are good in English pronunciation but have some difficulties in certain words due to the L2 influence, which has been experimented with by reading exercises, e.g., the short stories "Button, Button" and "Clearing in the Sky" and later on after treatment, i.e., teaching them correct pronunciation. Samples of their pronunciation were recorded in addition to their observation, in which some notes were written about their pronunciation. All the data were analyzed later on a descriptive basis. This study's population was all English students at all the colleges of Leads Group of Colleges, Gujranwala. The study's sample of 25 students contained two groups; (13 Boys and 12 Girls) at Leads Group of Colleges, Gujranwala. Data collection in this study was carried out using a combination of audio recordings and direct observation of representative groups of students.

Data Analysis

Inconsistency in English Vowels Sounds

English speech sounds have a variation to produce the same pronunciation with the same vowel sound because the same vowels sometimes are pronounced differently, having different sounds. Each vowel sound keeps more than one pronunciation. This misleads the students and causes mispronunciation (Gimson, A. C., & Crutteden, A., 1994). Such issues can be observed in the reading exercises by the students of Leads Group of Colleges, Gujranwala, e.g., 'son' /sʌn/, come /kʌm/, 'among' /ə'mʌŋ/ 'monkey' /'mʌŋki/, 'blood' /blʌd/, and 'foot' /fʊt/ all these words have the same sound of /ʌ/ except the last one word which shows the similar vowels different sound. O'Connor (2003) also talked about the variation in sounds due to similar vowels. It is challenging to acquire their difference in pronunciation functions; city /'siti/; busy /'bɪzi/; women /'wʊmən/; village /'vɪlɪdʒ/; and English /'ɪŋɡlɪʃ/ here different vowels are producing same sound /i/ which is opposite to the arguments mentioned above. Students cannot pronounce correctly or have sufficient knowledge about vowels.

Inconsistency in Consonant Sounds

English alphabets consist of 21 consonants letters which are more classified in Linguistics into 24 consonant sounds that also have inconsistency in their occurrence, such as the 's' sound has different sounds in its functioning with other consonants and vowels which are specific in certain words which are used in producing /z/ sound in 'boys,' /ʃ/ 'sh,' he's sound in sham, ocean, sure, unique, pension, machine, conscience, station, /ʒ/ sound in treasure, division, azure and /s/ sound in 'attacks.' These types of variations cause incorrect pronunciation for the HSSC Students at LGC.

Silent words also create difficulties in correct pronunciation

Some letters are silent in English, which is also hard to learn for students. 'B' is silent in the followings words;

Words	Correct Pronunciation	Incorrect Pronunciation of Students at LGC
Bomb	/bɒm/	/bɒmb/

Climb	/klɪm/	/klɪmb/
Comb	/kəʊm/	/kəʊmb/

‘C’ is silent in the followings words;

Words Correct pronunciation Incorrect Pronunciation of Students at LGC

Abscess	/'absɪs,'abses/	/'abskɪs,'abskes/
Ascent	/ə'sent/	/ə'skent/

‘H’ is silent in ‘archeology’ /,ɑ:kɪ'plədʒi/ mispronounced as /,ɑ:tʃɪ'plədʒi/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘E’ is silent in ‘hate’ /heit/ mispronounced as /herti:/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘L’ is silent in ‘calm’ /kɑ:m/ mispronounced as /kɑ:lm/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘P’ is silent in ‘psychology’ /saɪ'kɒlədʒi/ mispronounced as /psaɪ'kɒlədʒi/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘W’ is silent in ‘wrap’ /rap/ mispronounced as /wrap/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘K’ is silent in ‘knowledge’ /'nɒlɪdʒ/ mispronounced as /'knɒlɪdʒ/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘U’ is silent in ‘biscuit’ /'bɪskɪt/ mispronounced as /'bɪsku:i:t/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

‘N’ is silent in ‘column’ /'kɒləm/ mispronounced as /'kɒləmn/ by HSSC Students at LGC.

Students at the HSSC level struggle to remember silent letters and sounds for long time for certain words in which the silent sounds are omitted. Due to a lack of knowledge, students cannot leave the silent sound delivered by the lower classes/standards teachers.

Wrong Stress on Syllable(s)

Swann, J. Sergeant, and P. Sergeant (2012) found that native English speakers, instructors, and persons from the inner and outer cycle of English speakers all felt and considered that they spoke accurate English words. This was true regardless of whether or not they were certified to talk in English. ‘Adjective’ /ədʒɪktɪv/ has stressed at the last syllable, but HSSC students put stress in the beginning as ‘adjective’ /ædʒɪktɪv/. Students also have confusion about learning the stress on syllables, such as the following.

Stress on		Stress on	
1 st syllable	Words	2 nd Syllable	Words
/ˈsʌbdʒekt,ˈsʌbdʒɪkt/	Subject (Noun) /səbˈdʒekt/		Subject (Verb)
/ˈrekɔ:d/	Record (Noun) /rɪˈkɔ:d/	Record (Verb)	
/ˈdʌɪdʒest/	Digest (Noun)	/dʌɪˈdʒest,dɪˈdʒest/	Digest (Verb)
/ˈkɒntra:st/	Contrast (Noun) /kənˈtra:st/		Contrast (Verb)
/kɒnˈtent/	Content (Noun) /kənˈtent/		Content (Adjective)

This variation of syllables led the HSSC to learn the correct pronunciation.

Post Treatment: Data Analysis

All twenty-five (25) students were treated, then the researcher analyzed the data to find the difference. Students, after learning the correct pronunciation, had become able to pronounce the correct pronunciation of English words, but they were facing difficulties in the following:

Confusing Words bring Difficulties in Pronunciation

'sell' /sel/ and 'sale' /seil/;

'Affect' /ə'fekt/ and 'effect' /ɪ'fekt/;

'Lose' /lu:z/ and 'Loose' /lu:s/; and

'Than' /ðan/ and 'then' /ð(ə)n/

It was so confusing for HSSC students to go through the correct pronunciation. It was easy to understand correct pronunciation if the students were given treatment accordingly and they were punctual in practicing to memorize the right pronunciation/sounds of English words. Still, it was also found that students sometimes forget the correct pronunciation because they do not make these practices their study habits.

Aspirated sounds mislead the students

Bilabial sounds /p/ and alveolar /t/ have 'h' aspirated, which brings difficulties in actual pronunciation because non-native speakers try to copy the native speakers' accents with which they pronounce the incorrect pronunciation. Native speakers speak 'Pakistan' /pækɪstə:n/ when non-native speakers try to pronounce they mostly mispronounce it as /p^hækɪst^hə:n/.

Conclusion and Suggestions

English teachers and students do not focus on learning correct English pronunciation. They primarily focus on learning vocabulary and passing the final examinations. They do not take an interest in improving correct pronunciation but rather move forward with higher education. Teachers should be trained to ensure English pronunciation drills in the classroom to enhance pronunciation. Stress on syllables, the confusing function of English sounds, misconceptions about pronunciation, dual pronunciation, variation of sounds with similar consonants and vowels, and same sound occurrence due to different vowels have been discussed in the study, which explained the misconceptions about English pronunciation for teachers and students. The study shows the reasons behind the wrong pronunciations as not only students are responsible for mispronunciation but also teachers. Lack of teachers' training is also responsible for these pronunciation issues. English teachers must be taught the correct pronunciation to transfer the correct pronunciation among the students, even at the college level. The drills for correct pronunciation should be arranged to improve the pronunciation. Reading and listening activities should be planned among the different classes and motivate the students to pronounce the correct pronunciation. L1 negatively influences ESL learners in pronouncing correct English; it can be eliminated through daily reading books or newspapers and listening to English news channels.

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