PHONOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF MASS COMMUNICATION STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Phonology is the scientific study of the sound system. Mass communication students are exposed to different modes of human communication and this is aimed at making one proficient enough to communicate messages to others. Therefore, communication and phonology are inseparable because the latter entails the study of the sounds of a language, how they are articulated and the rules guiding their articulation to ensure an accurate expression. This study investigates the level of phonological challenges encountered in practical news broadcasting of Mass Communication students of the selected Nigerian private Universities. The population of the study comprised one hundred and forty-eight (148) final year students of Mass Communication from which forty-five students were randomly selected as sample. The data were audio-recorded students' practical news broadcasting activity. The data were phonetically transcribed and analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation and charts. The study found that the level of phonological challenges in the broadcasting communication of the students was high. It was discovered that the students faced in area of phonological challenges the application of phonological rules include substitution, under-differentiation, spelling, pronunciation, insertion of sounds and simplification of consonant cluster. The result of the analysis also showed that the phonological application on the speech communication of the students was highly influenced by their mother tongues (L1). It is recommended among others that the lecturers should pay attention to the differences in the phonological systems of the students' first language (L1) and the second language (L2) which can cause interference.

Keywords: Phonology, Challenges, Broadcasting, Mass Communication, Simplification.

INTRODUCTION

Language as a medium of communication has been a distinguishing factor between human beings and animals. It is a system which defines humans as rational beings and serves as a tool which are used to subdue animals' brutality. A lot of sounds are generated by human beings and animals and to some extent, inanimate objects. Sometimes these sounds come in its form of noises and as such, can be differentiated from human sounds that generate meaning. When human beings speak, they form sounds and these sounds generate meaning that can only be realized through phonological constituents. Thus, speech making is achieved when humans apply the universal properties of natural language sound system. In other words, to derive

meaning from human language, the study of phonology comes in. Phonology is the scientific study of the sound system and pronunciation of a language. It entails the classification of the sounds within the system of a particular language or languages. Sounds can be divided into consonants and vowels. The former can be characterised according to (1) place, (2) manner of articulation and (3) state of the glottis (voiceless or voiced). For vowels, one uses a coordinate system called a vowel quandrangle within which actual vowel values are located. Inadequate knowledge or imperfect learning of the sounds of the language could amount to communication breakdown which lead to ambiguity in communication.

Every language has peculiar sounds with which its language is produced and communicated. English has been in Nigeria for more than four centuries. English language as a lingua-franca and mainstay of communication in a multilingual society like Nigeria has its peculiar sounds with which it is identified, produced and communicated. It enhances human communication and serves as an important key to verbal/human communication. Language is said to be the bedrock of the broadcast media considering the fact that, it is the vehicle through which information is carried out. (Akan, Anorue, Obayi, Etu, Onyebuchi and Anorue, 2016). Its relevance to broadcasting cannot be overemphasized, as it is of great interest to any member of the society. Phonology is relevant in communication studies, because if the sounds of a language are not adequately learned and articulated, communication will not be effective and this can sometimes lead to misinformation which may eventually cause chaos or conflict in the society. In Nigerian institutions generally, the universities and other higher institutions in particular, English language is the main medium of communication. The same English is the medium of communication in most media houses in Nigeria. The effective use of the sounds of English is, therefore, crucial to all communications done in English and communication studies especially for mass communication where English language is the major tool. Therefore, phonology should be a major course which mass communication students should study thoroughly, so, as to be able to communicate proficiently in English. It is professionally horrible to perceive poor accent or mother tongue-interference in the language use of a newscasting news or anchoring a programme. Such a speech would suffer rejection and the message may suffer the intended meaning to the target audience. This makes Phonology relevant indeed to communication studies.

In spite of the status enjoyed by English as a language that occupies a pride of place in Nigeria, and despite the effort put to its effective communication, many broadcasters and intending broadcasters (mass communication students) still find it difficult to effectively manipulate the phonological features of the language. This, according to researchers is as a result of the irregularities stemming from both languages- the new and old languages. This has been attributed to the fact that more attention was paid in the past on the written form of language at the expense of the spoken form, forgetting that people speak more than they write (Oyinloye, 2010). This has gone a long way in promoting a negative effect of the influence of the mother tongue (MT) on the target language (TL) or second language. Unfortunately, in ordinary conversation, an application of any type especially phonological application goes unnoticed and is particularly ignored because most users in the country use English as their second language as well as their target language. Though application may be ignored in ordinary

conversation, it is a serious problem in broadcasting as it can breed semantic noise and affect the purpose of communication. Soneye (2007) examined the phonological sensitivity of newscasters in the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) to sound-spelling discrepancies in English. The study made use of thirty newscasters from one zonal and one non-zonal stations. Respondents were examined based on the framework of Orthographic Complexity which employs rhyme-matching, alliteration-oddity detection, elision and phoneme counting tasks. The results indicate that only 36.67% of respondents recognize phonological redundancies in the elision task of supposedly common English words. The probability of the occurrence of spelling pronunciation across phoneme, rhyme and alliteration tasks is 0.032, 0.193 and 1.000 respectively. Respondents were sensitive to spellings with phonemic tendencies as 80% passes in American sound-spelling compliant words and 45% when otherwise.

Aliye and Neda (2016) assess the influence of phonological awareness on reading performance of EFL students at Azad Islamic University of Kerman. Fifty (50) EFL students participated in the study through a qualitative and quantitative survey. Phonological awareness is measured by four tasks. The result of the study reveals that phonological awareness has a significant role in reading performance of EFL students of the participants. Ahmad, Ranni and Ingatan (2016) investigate the phonological difficulties faced by the students as second language learners of English. The study focuses on those difficulties when teaching English to L2 learners of English. Data were collected by conducting a survey on talks, speeches, and presentations made by the students. How the students pronounce the words are recorded and analysed. The result of the study reveals that most of the phonological problems found were related to consonant sounds such as voiced dental fricative, voiceless dental fricative, voiceless post-alveolar fricative, and voiced alveolar approximant sounds.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Using phonemes in context is one major problem that Nigerian speakers of English language face. Realization of phonemes in spellings is also a major feature that distinguishes one variety of English from another. These tasks are quite significant because they help to determine identity, standards and model choice in language studies. One of the problems that Nigerian students of Linguistics, English and Mass Communication have is the uncertainty on how to pronounce certain graphemes when either reading aloud or talking.

In broadcasting, effective communication is of utmost importance. Despite efforts made to promote the effective learning of English as the mainstay of communication in Nigeria, many people including broadcasters still find it difficult to effectively manipulate the phonological features of the language. The English language has supra segmental features such as stress, rhythm and intonation. These features affect the quality of individual sound segments. In phonetic terms, stressed syllables are produced with stronger burst in initiatory energy. When a sentence is stressed or unstressed, there is usually a rise and fall in the voice pitch as one speaks. Intonation indicates whether a sentence is a statement, command, question or an exclamation. It conveys the attitude of the speaker towards the listener and the message. It serves as the life blood of the language in broadcasting. Supra segmented sounds, "are so

important in speech that they do not only affect messages produced when humans speak but, also affect the message" (Onuigbo, 2001 cited in Akan, Anorue, Obayi, Etu, Onyebuchi and Anorue, 2016). They function within longer units like words, phrases and sentences; they cannot be broken into smaller units. The ways supra segmented features of English are used differ greatly from the way they are used in most Nigerian languages and that poses problems for the speakers/learners of English. This study seeks to examine the challenges in the application of the phonology in the broadcasting practical of Mass Communication students in private Universities in Nigeria. Private universities were the sampled audience because people believe that brilliant students are always admitted into private universities, qualified teachers and relevant learning materials are readily available to students.

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed to guide the study:

1) What is the level of phonological application in the broadcasting communication of Mass Communication students of Nigerian private universities?

2) What are the phonological problems faced by the students of Mass Communication in Nigerian private universities?

3) What are the factors that influence the phonological application on the speech communication of Mass Communication students in Nigerian private universities?

METHODOLOGY

The study is a descriptive survey design. The population of the study comprised one hundred and forty-eight (148) final year students of Mass Communication of selected Nigerian private universities. Forty-five students were randomly selected from the population. The data were students' audio-recorded practical on news broadcasting. The data were phonetically transcribed. The target sounds were transcribed verbatim as pronounced by the participants. A score of 1 or 0 was given for the target word, depending on the appropriate pronunciation of the target phone in the word. The data were also analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation and charts.

RESULTS

Table 1: Gender of the Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	65	44%
Female	83	56%
Total	**148**	**100%**

Table 1 above analysed the gender of the participants. From the table, 65 (44%) participants are male students while 83 (56%) participants are female students. This result shows that there were more female than male in the sample studied.

The data are shown in the pie chart below:
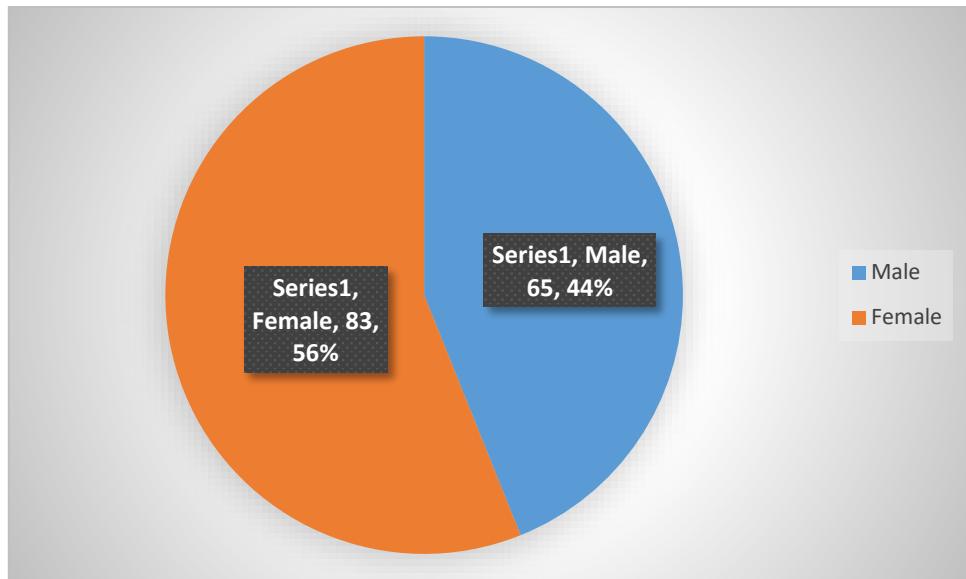
Figure 1: Gender of the Participants

Research Question One: What is the level of phonological application in the broadcasting communication of Mass Communication students of Nigerian private universities?

Table 2: Level of phonological application in the broadcasting communication of Mass Communication students in select Nigerian private universities

S/N	Practical	Number of Phonological Errors	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	1st Practical	89	1.69	0.97
2	2nd Practical	101	1.8	1.00
3	3rd Practical	125	1.95	1.10
Grand Mean		**315**	**1.81**	**3.07**

Table 2 shows that the total numbers of phonological errors made by the students in the three practicals were 315. The table also shows that there was an increase in the number of the phonological errors made by the students. This shows that the level of phonological application in the broadcasting communication of the Mass Communication students is below expectation.

Research Question Two: What are the phonological problems faced by the students in the application of phonology?

Table 3 (a): Substitution

Sounds	/p/with /f/	/z/with /s/	/ei/with /e/	/v/ with /f/	/θ/with /t/
Frequency	36	13	75	18	6
Percentage	24.3%	8.7%	50.7%	12.2%	4.05%

Table 3 (b): Under Differentiation

Sounds	/ɑː/	/∂/	/ɜː/	/æ/
Frequency	49	27	34	38
Percentage	33.1%	18.2%	23%	25.7%

Table 3 (c): Spelling Pronunciation

Words	Problem	Distorted
Frequency	84	64
Percentage	56.8%	43.2%

Table 3 (d): Epenthesis

Words	Film	Helm	Comb	Bomb
Frequency	24	73	33	18
Percentage	16.2%	49.3%	22.3%	12.2%

Table 3 (e): Simplification

Words	Example	Examine	Subject
Frequency	85	26	37
Percentage	57.4%	17.6%	25

The tables above reveal that the problems faced by the students in the application of phonology include substitution, under-differentiation, spelling, pronunciation, epenthesis and simplification, of consonant cluster. From the sampled phonological errors made by the participants in the tables above, the participants substituted phonemes of English Language with the ones that were available in their first language.

They also pronounced different vowel sounds with near vowel sounds in the native language. They pronounced words according to how the words were written. Also, they eliminated some consonant sounds in the situation of consonant cluster and they fixed in vowel sounds in some words ending or in between consonant cluster.

Research Question Three: What are the factors that influence the phonological application on the speech communication of the students?

Table 4: The factors that influenced the phonological application on the speech communication of the students

S/N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	The environment in which the students find themselves is usually linguistically illiterate	2.58	1.25
2	Absent of some sounds of English in Nigerian languages inventory	2.65	1.26
3	Ill-equipped teachers with in-depth knowledge of the phonetics and phonology of English.	2.61	1.18
4	Lack of audio-visual aids during oral English lessons	2.58	1.21
5	Mother tongue interference	2.67	1.19
6	Speech organ is not adjustable	2.66	1.20
	Grand Mean	**2.63**	**1.22**

Table 4 shows the factors that could have influenced the phonological application on the speech communication of the students. All the items have mean value greater than criterion mean of 2.5 and also grand mean of 2.63. The item with the highest mean was that of Mother tongue interference while is another strong cause of poor English pronunciation. This revealed that the phonological application on the speech communication of the students was mostly influenced by their mother tongues (L1).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research question one revealed that the level of phonological application in the broadcasting communication of the final year Mass Communication students is beyond expectation. The result of this finding is in agreement with the findings of Aladeyomi and Adetunde (2007), who studied the errors related to segmental phonemes in the spoken English of television newscasters in Nigeria and found that the newscasters commit phonological errors which expose their inadequacies   and the wide gap between Standard English and Nigerian English. This situation makes it difficult to accept the performance of media practitioners as models.

Research question two revealed that the problems faced by the students in the application of phonology include substitution, under-differentiation, spelling pronunciation, epenthesis and simplification of consonant cluster. The finding of this study is in line with the findings of the study of Muhammad (2015), who investigated the level of phonological interference in the speech of Hausa-English bilingual: A case study of Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto.

The Recorded speech of ten selected native speakers of Hausa was used. Students who were native speakers of Hausa were sampled. It was discovered that phonological features of Hausa such as substitution, under-differentiation, spelling pronunciation, epenthesis and simplification, of consonant cluster were the common features found in the oral English of the samples.

Research question three revealed that the phonological application on the speech communication of the students was influenced by their mother tongues (L1). Many linguists have agreed that it is one major source of challenge in second language learning/acquisition. They all in their various ways explain that when a second language user resorts to falling back onto the L1 for filling up the gaps created by insufficient knowledge of the L2, users are bound to make errors especially when the L1 and L2 are very different (Odlin 1989 Apeli & Ugwu, 2013).

Morales and Izquierdo (2011) stated that in the literature on second language acquisition, there is now strong evidence that the learners' mother tongue plays a major role in the acquisition of L2 features (e.g., Izquierdo, 2009). In the case of L2-phonology acquisition, research has shown that similarities between the learners of L1 and L2 sound systems influence L2 sound perception and production (Flege, 1995; Pech & Izquierdo, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that the participants have problems with most of the sounds which are not available in their first language inventory, consequently, they replaced them with the ones that do not exist in English language. This, however, caused errors of substitution, under-differentiation, deletion and addition of sounds which always result to misinformation, communication gaps and ambiguity of information.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, it is recommended that:

1. Lecturers of English should be aware of the phonetic problems faced by English learner and pay attention to the differences in the phonological systems of the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) which can cause interference.

2. Learning institutions should make the study of English language a serious matter for students of Mass communication. This will go a long way to improve the quality of students sent into the labour market and consequently, better the broadcasting profession in Nigeria.

3. Pronunciation problems among students in Nigeria may be resolved if, the Ministry of Education invests time and resources in scholarly research in English phonetics and phonology at the higher levels. Training, retraining, and provision of course materials for improved effectiveness and productive research in English Pronunciation teaching at the secondary level should also be provided. Ministries of education can partner with the British council, C4C and the USAID to sponsor these researches and bring this anomaly to an end.

4. Teachers should be encouraged to use different types of audio-visual aids and equipment to teach English phonetics in their classrooms. Talking and pronouncing dictionaries which are in electronic forms can be included. Also, high quality materials, which are computer based and digitally propelled or driven with audio demonstrations for learners of English pronunciation both for self-access and for use in classes where the teacher needs support of this kind should be provided.

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