

INQUIRING ABOUT THE PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY EFL LEARNERS IN BENIN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study explores the pronunciation difficulties encountered by EFL learners in some Benin secondary schools. The methodology adopted during the inquiring was both quantitative and qualitative. It consisted in collecting information from EFL teachers and learners through the means of classroom observations and questionnaires. The data obtained from questionnaires have been analyzed and discussed in order to draw relevant conclusions. The obtained results reveal that learners are facing challenges in English language skills such as: speaking and reading in general and particularly the problems related to pronunciation. Suggestions have been made to EFL teachers, school authorities, and specifically learners so as to overcome those difficulties.

Key-words: *pronunciation, difficulties, phonetics, English language, foreign language.*

Résumé

Cette étude examine des difficultés liées à la prononciation que rencontrent des apprenants de certains collèges du Bénin. Les méthodes quantitative et qualitative, consistant à collecter des informations chez des enseignants d'Anglais et apprenants à travers des visites de classes et questionnaires, ont guidé cette étude. Les données collectées à base des questionnaires ont été analysées et discutées afin de tirer de conclusions pertinentes. Les résultats obtenus révèlent des défis dans les habiletés de la langue anglaise, notamment le parlé et la lecture en général et des problèmes liés à la prononciation en particulier. Des suggestions ont été formulées à l'endroit des enseignants, des autorités, et surtout des apprenants pour surmonter ces difficultés.

Mots-clés : *prononciation, difficultés, phonétique, langue anglaise, langue étrangère.*

1 Introduction

Admittedly, communication among human beings, though possible through signals devices such as facial expressions and other bodily motions, is mainly carried out through languages. Thus, a language appears as a medium of exchange in society, a corridor leading to people's consciousness, an open avenue enabling the exploration of a community's values and culture. It can either be learnt or acquired according to the case. Treating with language acquisition, Haynes (2005:47) says:

Children acquire language through a subconscious process during which they are unaware of grammatical rules. This is similar to the way they acquire their first language. They get a feel for what is and what isn't correct. In order to acquire language, the learner needs a source of natural communication.

... Young students who are in process of acquiring English get plenty of "on the job" practice. They readily acquire the language to communicate with classmates. Language learning, on the other hand, is not communicative. It is the result of direct instruction in the rules of language.

In actual fact, we express our thoughts, our desires, and our feelings by means of language. Owing to language, we maintain contact between one another and even assure the growth and the progress of the world; that is why learning a target language becomes necessary.

As for learning other languages, especially within the framework of Beninese educational system, it draws one's attention not only on such languages as Spanish, German but also to the English language; which is for many centuries the dominant language of education business, diplomacy, job, opportunity, technology, religion, governmental and social relations in the world owing to the great number of the people that speak that language in the world; estimated by Cristal (2005:3) at about one or two billion, the population comprises more non-native than native speakers. Indeed: *"The number of the people for whom English is the mother tongue is widely agree to be around 350 million" whereas "the comparable figure of non-native speakers has been roughly estimated at about 700 to 750 million."*

Owing to the importance of English all over the world, its learning becomes compulsory. In Benin Republic, the English language is taught from primary level up to university level in the Beninese educational system. Learning a foreign language like English, however, turns out to be an easy task as it involves the mastering of several linguistic skills such as speaking, reading and listening. In Benin, EFL students encounter difficulties to pronounce English words and this prevents them from being understood when they are speaking; they are not therefore communicating since there is no communication without understanding.

To communicate properly, we need correct pronunciation because pronunciation affects very much the understanding of the meaning of the words. To avoid such kind of problems, every EFL learner should know the correct pronunciation and should be understood. Pronunciation is very important when expressing ideas and thoughts in any language but EFL learners face many difficulties in this field. They mispronounce many English words because of the interference of the French language on the former and the difference between spelling which makes them non competent. It is in this context that this research work was carried on **“Inquiring about the Pronunciation Difficulties Encountered by EFL Students in Benin Secondary Schools”**.

2 literature review

Many second language learners (L2) of secondary schools face lots of problems with pronunciation. A learner who consistently mispronounces a range of sounds cannot be understood by other users of the language. Dealing with pronunciation difficulties, Lado (2002:2), points out: *“individuals tend to transfer the forms and meaning and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture”*.

Similarly, Gimson (1999:3) points out: *“The pronunciation of a second language poses problems of a different kind from those which we face when we learn our first language when we embark upon the acquisition of a second language; the first requirement is to overcome the pronunciation prejudices which have become instilled in us”*. So, the best pronunciation of a second or a foreign language demands an effort on the part of the learners. They have a

great effort to do for exterminating or for reducing the impact of the first language on the second language learning process. Still on this negative influence earlier mentioned, Betty (2001:64) emphasized it by uttering: *“One of the most important aspects of learning a second language is the effort to master the sound system, to pronounce the language”*. For him, difficulty encountered by learners is still related to pronunciation.

As for Lund (2003:16), pronunciation creates an interaction between the cognitive and physiological processes. Lund says: *“Pronunciation is the only aspect of language that calls a close interaction between the cognitive and physiological processes. In acquiring new sounds we are also dealing with a complex re-organizing of the articulator processes”*. To overcome the pronunciation difficulties, its teaching is compulsory. Talking about of teaching English pronunciation, Yehou  nou (2006:10) underlines:

For the past twenty-five years or so, English phonetics has been on the curriculum in the English department. Fewer and fewer students, by the time they complete their studies at M. A. level, exhibit competence and confidence when using the English language. A first hand observation brings to light the diagnosis that, despite a tremendous good will, the threefold ability of writing, speaking and listening requires more attention and surveillance. One needs to stress that it is difficult to achieve real proficiency with large classes. In a phonetics class for example, the competent teacher will have to have an eye on each member of his class and therefore lend him an attentive ear in order to monitor his or her oral production.

Basing of the above statement, it is obvious that the lack of interest in pronunciation has led to a corresponding lack of research. So, pronunciation has once come as a necessary element of the language instruction. For Lightbown and Spade (1999), teachers and students must use correct pronunciation from the beginning because students who have learned correct pronunciation and speech patterns can begin to practice and ultimately improve their speech pattern.

According to Gelvanowsky (2002), pronunciation has an important social value, which means that it should be related to prestige, such as intelligence, professional competence, persuasiveness, diligence, and social origin, and in most cases it is the most salient characteristic of

non-native speakers. Some studies also find that pronunciation usually relate to the indispensable factors for socio-economic success: intelligence, professional competence, persuasiveness, diligence, social privilege and so on (Hudson, 1980; Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994).

To fulfill the role of the teaching English pronunciation in the learning, Celce-Murcia (1996:7) suggests that the communicative approach to the teaching of pronunciation is urgent and important because the non-native speakers need to have a threshold level of pronunciation: *“If they fall below this threshold level, they will have oral communication problems no matter how excellent and extensive their control of English grammar and vocabulary might be”*.

Otlouski and Fraser (1999:3) concurs with much research as that: *“The goals of pronunciation teaching should not necessary be acquiring native-like pronunciation, but developing functional intelligibility, communicability increase, self-confidence, the development of speech sounds”*. Basing on this statement, one can say that for the lack of pronouncing English words like native English speakers, we must try to respect the rules that govern that language pronunciation and try to adapt our speech organs.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Research Population and Sampling

This work was carried out in two secondary schools in Ouémé region, CEG Sèmè-Podji and CEG Adjohoun to observe the difficulties related to pronunciation, EFL teachers and learners were mainly implicated. But the questionnaire was addressed to only students. An overall number of one hundred and twenty (120) learners were selected from both schools. The choice was directed to students only because the theme was centered on their difficulties.

3.2 Research Instruments

3.2.1 The Questionnaire

As previously mentioned, questionnaires have been addressed to one hundred and twenty (120) learners selected from both schools under investigation.

3.2.1 Interviews

The objective in undertaking an interview with EFL students was to find out the common problems of pronunciation that those students encountered daily in classroom situation. As being necessary and fundamental for many research works, interviews helped us to gather some useful and basic pieces of information related to pronunciation difficulties encountered by EFL students. They constituted the guidelines of our study and provided us with the relevant answers to solve the issue. In theory, about one hundred and ten (110) English learners were interviewed from the concerned areas of investigation. To achieve such a goal, a questionnaire was set out.

To get their opinions and ideas about the topic of the research work, English learners were designed questionnaire. This questionnaire was respectively made up of thirteen (13) questions mainly based on English pronunciation difficulties. Those questions were addressed in a written form and had the answer in a spoken one. The questions were attached to the Appendix of the study.

4. Data analysis and interpretation of the findings

4.1 Analysis and Comment on the EFL Students' Questionnaire

When the students were asked if they liked the English language, almost ninety percent of them answered 'No'. According to them, they did not like English because they did not succeed in pronouncing English words correctly. They also added that when their teachers spoke, they never understood. To check the number of the students who had difficulties in pronouncing English words, they were asked if they had difficulties in pronouncing English words. More than ninety three percent of them answered 'Yes'. As far as their knowledge about English alphabetic letters, they answered 'Yes'. To identify a little bit their difficulties, they were also asked to pronounce some English words.

4.2 Analysis and Comment on the EFL Students' Interview

When the students read loudly a carrier sentence with a word containing the letter "a", they realized that letter as [eɪ] in every word. According to them as that letter is pronounced [eɪ] in English

alphabetic letters, they were used to pronouncing it [eɪ] everywhere they have that letter. Almost one hundred percent of the students made that mistake.

When the students read loudly a carrier sentence with a word containing the letter “o”, they realized that letter as [əʊ] in every word. According to them as that letter is pronounced [əʊ] in English alphabetic letters, they were used to pronouncing it [əʊ] in every word. Almost one hundred percent of the students made that mistake.

To read loudly a carrier sentence with a word containing the letter “e”, the students realized the “e” as [ɪ] in every word. According to them, that letter was pronounced [ɪ] in English alphabetic letters. They also added that they were used to pronouncing “e” as [ɪ] in every word. Almost all of them make that mistake.

Saying loudly a carrier sentence with a word containing the letter “i”, they realized it as [aɪ]. According to them, that letter was pronounced [aɪ] in English alphabetic letters, they added that is why they pronounced it [aɪ] in every word.

When the students read loudly a carrier sentence with a word containing the letter “y”, they realized it as [waɪ]. According to them the letter was pronounced [waɪ] in English alphabetic letters, they added that why they pronounced it [waɪ] in every word. Loud pronunciation of some carrier sentences with words containing some sequences:

- **Sequence “al”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounce the grapheme –“al” as if it were in French. So –“al” is phonetically realized as [al] by EFL students. They pronounced the words in that way because they assimilated them to the French words. In French the grapheme –“al” is realized as [al] and EFL students of the French speaking countries consider these French sounds as being the adequate ones for the English pronunciation; let’s recall that “al” is realized [əl] in English.

- **Sequence “ch”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounce the “ch” as [dʒ] everywhere. They pronounced it [dʒ] because according to them, the sequence “ch” is realized as [dʒ] in English.

- **Sequence “ur”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounced the grapheme “ur” as if it were in French. So “ur” is phonetically realized as [ur] by EFL students. They pronounced the words in that way because they assimilated them to the French words. In French speaking countries, EFL students considered these French sounds as being the adequate ones for the English pronunciation. Let’s recall that “ur” is realized as [ɜ:] in English.

- **Sequence “ir”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounce the grapheme “ir” as if it were in French. So, “ir” is phonetically realized as [ir] by EFL students. They pronounced the words in that way because they assimilated them to the French words. In French “ir” is realized as [ir] and EFL students of the French speaking countries consider these French sounds as being the adequate ones for the English pronunciation. Let’s recall that “ir” is realized as [ɜ:] in English.

- **Sequence “ar”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounce the grapheme –“ar” as if it were in French. So, “ar” is phonetically realized as [ar] by EFL students. They pronounced the words in that way because they assimilated them to the French words. In French “ar” is realized as [ar] and EFL students of the French speaking countries consider these French sounds as being the adequate ones for the English pronunciation. Let’s recall that “ar” is realized as [ʌ] in English.

- **Sequence “ou”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounced the grapheme “ou” as if it were in French. So, “ou” is realized as [u] by EFL students, they pronounce the words in that way because they assimilated them to the French words. In French “ou” is realized as [u] and EFL students of the French speaking countries consider these French sounds as the adequate ones for the English pronunciation. Let’s recall that “ou” is realized [ʌ] in English.

- **Sequence “oa”**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounced the grapheme “oa” as if it were in French. So, “oa” is phonetically realized as [oa] by EFL students. They pronounced the words in that way because they assimilated them to the French words. In French “oa” is

realized as [oa] and EFL students of the French speaking countries consider these French sounds as being the adequate ones for the English pronunciation. Let's recall that "oa" is realized as [əʊ] in English.

- **Sequence "our"**

EFL students ignored the best pronunciation and pronounced the grapheme "our" as it were in French. So, "our" is phonetically realized as [ur] by EFL students. They pronounced them so because they assimilated them to the French words. In French "our" is realized as [ur] and EFL students of the French speaking countries consider these French sounds as being the adequate ones for the English pronunciation.

Regarding the pronunciation of triphthongs, students ignored how a word which had only one vowel could be transformed into three vowels. That is to say that they were not familiar with such a pronunciation and for that, they encountered many obstacles in producing the right sound.

Example: player *[pleɪjə]

What was also remarkable was that no stress was respected by EFL students; this means that, the words were pronounced without any intonation. To check if EFL students pronounced English words with stress; we gave them a list of words. We noticed that EFL students pronounced English words with no attention to stress.

The pronunciation difficulties of some English items encountered by EFL students were due to the differences between the two languages: English and French.

5. Discussion and implications

There is an urgent need for Benin EFL teachers to rethink the issue of learners' pronunciation. In order to do this, teachers need new skills, training, and support from the educational system. Many questions about the good implementation of the techniques of pronunciation in Benin EFL classrooms remain to be addressed. This study has shown that there are factors that may affect the learning pronunciation. These include the accent, the motivation and the environment Crystal (2003:3), through his research has concluded that an accent strongly impacts the learner's pronunciation. He states that "the accent plays an

important role and it is the cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation that identify where a person is from, regionally or socially". Furthermore, in their recent research, Marinova-Todd et al. (2000) suggest that environment and motivation may be more important factors in the development of native-like pronunciation than is age at acquisition.

The present study suggests the importance of teaching speech from the perspective of supra-segmental because it is vital for the communicative approach to teaching EFL. The same suggestion goes along with the research of Bray (1995:3) who had noted that "*Although many theorists began to make a case for the role of supra-segmental phonology in communication on paper, "many teachers continue with a limited conception of the role of explicit phonological instruction in the language classroom."*

One of the issues we came up with in this study was in the linguistic interference. Learners and teachers were confronted to those difficulties. It was quite impossible for some learners to pronounce some words due to some vowel and consonants sounds. For Littlewood (2004:25), interference is the learner uses his previous mother-tongue experiences as a means of organizing foreign language data". This remark strongly correlates with the observations undertook by Tiono and Yostanto (2008) on interference issues in Indonesia. They came into the conclusion that the interference may occur when there are some English sounds that do not occur in Indonesian like [ph], [th], [θ], [ð], [i:], [ʊ], [u:], [æ], and [e]. Therefore, the students will pronounce these with sounds that exist in Indonesian which are closest to them.

6. Suggestions

6.1 Suggestions to EFL Teachers

English teachers are first and foremost instructors, educators, the ones who endowed enough with a certain number of English language speaking skills that they have to teach their students. But, most of the time, some do not succeed in teaching accurately that language to their students. Thus, they must get at their disposal pronunciation documents. They should also offer their students more opportunities to express themselves and develop English language speaking skill through speaking activities or via pronunciation rules; after teaching the

English phonetics letters. In addition, they must avoid pronouncing English words as French ones. They must also pronounce accurately English words during their course hours and invite their students to do likewise. Furthermore, they must improve their English language speaking skill by keeping in their mind the different pronunciation rules.

They must do their best utmost to insert into their syllabus spoken assessment activities that can help their students entertain and speak easily and fluently the English language. They may initiate learners to jigsaw which is a form of information gap. They try to combine words with each other to create sentences. These sentences consist of words that the learners have difficulty to pronounce. For example, in the word “rise” which has the letters “s” that they must pronounce it as “z” and producing /raIz/ e.g. I was surprised that the raisings rise!

A second type of activity EFL teachers can use is Tongue Twister. This kind of activity helps students pronounce difficult words and phrases so quickly. For example: Bola piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. A third activity, teachers may use is Drilling Techniques. There are lots of drills which can help students to improve their English pronunciation. Substitution drills for example can be applied by substituting any sound instead of other sound. For instance, /t/ sound instead of /I_v/ and /d/ in place of /Ä°/ (e.g. this is thin/tin.) All these are very useful for teaching the correct pronunciation of the words and sentences. Finally, EFL teachers should make a distinction between stress- and syllable-based languages, especially if an adult English language learner speaks a first language that is different rhythmically from stress-based British or American English. An understanding of whether a learner’s first language is stress based or syllable based will help a teacher plan appropriate pronunciation exercises for learners.

6.2 Suggestions to School Authorities

As far as school authorities are concerned, we have those in charge of ruling the schools and those in charge of ruling the educational politics in our country. Talking about those in charge of ruling the schools, they should make sure that the school libraries are fully equipped with English books not only for teachers but for students also. They must make sure that there are English clubs in each school. For the recruiting of teachers, mostly part-time teachers, they should select qualified

teachers putting each of them at the right place in accordance with what they have learnt from the university in order not to have at the place of an English teacher, a low science graduate.

They should also organize excursions which are very important for the government to finance such a thing in order to help EFL learners and their teachers to travel to English speaking countries where they will have a conversation with native speakers. Conversations will become very demanding for them since they will have in front of them only English speakers. There, they will make friends with native speakers, they will cooperate and discuss together. In such conditions, they have no other opinion than try to speak the language. When the government notices that it is expensive to send every EFL student of the school, they can select learners per year for the excursions. Once back to their country, they will keep on the friendship by keeping in touch their friends through the internet, the telephones and letters to have informations about each other or one another. If the government tries to harmonize English learning with excursions, that will help them master both speaking and writing skills.

6.3 Suggestions to EFL Learners

All English learners must bear in mind that English is today the most spoken and useful language of the planet. So, speaking good English is an advantage for them. For this reason, they must try to express themselves in English during their course hour. They should also use as more as possible English language as their medium of communication every time and everywhere. Furthermore, they must also try to speak the English language with any English speaker they meet on their way without being reluctant or ashamed. They must seek for good English speaking environment and tools and they must learn by heart the English pronunciation rules.

Conclusion

To round off, it is fairly safe to say that in our system, secondary school students' English speech sounds lag far behind the standard ones they are expected to produce. That brings us face to face the issue of deviance. As a matter of fact, to improve EFL English speech sounds, more attention must be put on segmental and suprasegmental features.

EFL students have difficulty in pronouncing English words, although they are taught English alphabetic letters, because of the linguistic framework that has moulded and shaped those students' speech behaviour at their tender stages of life and learning process.

They also face pronunciation difficulties because they are living in a multi-socio-cultural environment which is full of many other speech communities especially people speaking French language. EFL students are asked to read loudly some carrier sentences in which there are specified words containing letters or graphemes that EFL students were made to pronounce. A comment was also made on each of those letters or graphemes. We also went through a literature review through which we have an idea about what some scholars said about pronunciation difficulties.

To find solutions to the pronunciation difficulties encountered by EFL students, some suggestions were made to EFL teachers, school authorities and EFL learners. In a nutshell, this study helps us to be aware of how EFL students encounter pronunciation difficulties in Benin. Eventually, the close reading of this study makes it stand out that the emphasis is heavily laid upon the segmental aspect of EFL students' pronunciation. Thus, their speech behaviours as regards the realization of supra segmental features are another field.

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Appendix

Questionnaire to EFL Learners

This questionnaire is addressed to EFL students and is mainly related to their encountered difficulties. The items are displayed as follow:

Part One: General Knowledge

a) Do you like English? Yes No

b) What make(s) English difficult for you:

Pronunciation? Reading? Grammar?

Vocabulary?

c) Are you learning how to pronounce English words correctly?

Yes No

d) What don't you like during English classes?

The teacher speaks only French.

The teacher speaks only English.

The teacher does not make us speak English.

The teacher does not say if our pronunciation is right or wrong.

e) Do you think your teacher should teach you phonetics? Yes

No

Part Two: Practice

f) Read these words with the grapheme “un”

Country Pronunciation Unfavorable

Jungle

g) Read these words with the grapheme “al”

Natural Fatal Almost Alright

h) Say these words with the grapheme “ar”

Regular Liar Farmer Hear

i) How do you read the grapheme “ou”

Loud You Announce

Enough

j) Can you please say these words the grapheme “oa”

Board Coalition Oasis

Soar

k) Read these words with the grapheme “ch”

Research Ache Stomach

Teacher

l) The realization of Read these words with the grapheme “ir”

Circle Sir Bird

Squirrels

m) Read these words with the grapheme “our”

Glamour Hour Court

Resources

Appendice

Questionnaire des élèves

Ce questionnaire est adressé aux élèves qui apprennent l'Anglais comme étant une langue étrangère et vise à repérer les difficultés qu'ils rencontrent au cours de ce processus.

Première Partie : Connaissance Générale

a) Aimez-vous l'Anglais ? Oui Non

b) Qu'est ce qui rend l'Anglais difficile pour vous :

Prononciation ? Lecture ? Grammaire ?

Vocabulaire ?

c) Apprenez-vous à prononcer correctement les mots Anglais ?

Oui Non

d) Qu'est ce que vous n'aimez pas pendant un cours d'Anglais :

L'enseignant s'exprime uniquement en Anglais ?

L'enseignant s'exprime uniquement en French ?

L'enseignant ne nous fait pas parlé l'Anglais ?

L'enseignant ne nous dit pas si notre prononciation est correcte ou fausse ?

e) Pensez vous qu'on doit vous enseigner la phonétique ?

Deuxième Partie : Pratique

f) Lisez ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "un"

Country Pronunciation Unfavorable

Jungle

g) Lisez ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "al"

Natural Fatal Almost Alright

h) Dites ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "ar"

Regular Liar Farmer Hear

i) Lisez ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "ou"

Loud You Announce Enough

j) Pouvez-vous prononcer ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "oa"

Board Coalition Oasis Soar

k) Lisez ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "ch"

Research Ache stomach Teacher

l) Lisez ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "ir"

Circle Sir Bird Squirrels

m) Lisez ces mots Anglais avec le graphisme "our"

Glamour Hour Cour Resources