

SPELLING PRONUNCIATION AS A MEANS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH: INSIGHT FROM SOME SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN EBONYI STATE

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Abstract

Spelling pronunciation in English is a vital aspect of phonology which has been neglected by teachers of English in the use of English as a second language or English as a foreign language. This adversely affects proper articulation of English speech sounds. Mother Tongue interference continues to be regarded as the major cause of difficulty in spelling pronunciation in English as a means of communication. There is need to study the language in contact for the purpose of detecting those areas that can pose problems to the students. This paper will therefore consider the place of spelling pronunciation as an efficient and effective means of communication in our schools. It will address problems students often encounter in their spelling pronunciation and suggest ways of improving spelling pronunciation in our schools.

Keywords: Spelling, Pronunciation, Communication, Mother Tongue Interference

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is a process of imitation and reinforcement. The child listens and copies the utterance heard around him. The acquisition of first language (L1) or Mother tongue (L2) is therefore, the result of the interaction between endowment and environmental factors. It is responses are strengthened by the repetitions, corrections and other reactions that adults provide. However, language, which is a means of communication with others is especially and primary sound. Language consists of sounds

and symbols are divided into words and groups of words. Acquisition of these sounds and symbols start with listening and speaking. Skill which form a very important aspect of spelling pronunciation.

According to Wells (1982), spelling pronunciation refers to the pronunciation of words which is derived form or is influenced by its spelling. On the other hand, spelling pronunciation can be described as “the creation of new spelling form on the basis of pronunciation, spelling pronunciation is vital to all learners of English especially students in the secondary school because it enables them to identify and recognize words from its base or root. There is need to point out that spelling pronunciation occurs in the English of both native and non native speakers of English. This raises the issue of Received Pronunciation (RP) as a model of spelling pronunciation. Kachru (1992) argued that the concept of standard pronunciation such as Received Pronunciation (RP) is “a bad rather than good thing’

This is why spelling pronunciation is not given its due priority attention among the learners of English language. Spelling pronunciation should rather be learnt and studied as a school subject, an integral part of phonology.

Dalton (2002) posited that pronunciation is still neglected in English as a foreign language or English as a second language classrooms, throughout the world including English speaking countries in Africa. Morley (1991) collaborated with that view and affirmed that this important area is neglected or ignored at many universities and colleges around the world. It is observed that in some Universities in West Africa including Nigeria, pronunciation course is still only an elective course. In the United States, many teachers believe that spending time on pronunciation is useless because it would be difficult if not impossible for students to understand the differences for instance between ship and sheep.

Wong, (1987) pointed out that even when the non-native speaker's vocabulary and grammar are excellent, if their pronunciation falls below a certain threshold level, they are unable to communicate effectively. Wong (1993) equally argued that the importance of pronunciation is even more distinct when the connection between Pronunciation and listening comprehension is considered. As listeners expect spoken English to follow certain pattern of rhythm and intonation, speakers need to employ these patterns to communicate effectively. If the rhythm and intonation are different, listeners simply cannot get the meaning.

Similarly, listeners need to know how speech is organized and what patterns of intonation mean in order to interpret speech accurately. Thus, learning about pronunciation develops learners' abilities to comprehend spoken English. Furthermore, Wong demonstrated that a lack of knowledge of pronunciation could even affect student's reading and spelling. He examined the factors that affect listening comprehension in native speakers of English exposed to foreign or second language (L2) accent to include lack of spelling pronunciation and wrong articulation of sounds. He concluded that grammar and pronunciation interact to influence overall intelligibility. Thus, native English speakers often judge non-native English speakers as being intelligible if the latter's pronunciation is not at par with each other.

Dalton (2002) posits that language teachers who spend some time learning and practicing strategies for teaching pronunciation will not have the embarrassment in the classroom anymore and students' pronunciation will be effectively improved.

Theoretical Framework

The appropriate teaching techniques teachers could apply in teaching spelling pronunciation is audio-lingual method (ALM) which takes much cognizance of spoken

English communication needs of second learners of English language (SLE). The method sees the teacher as a role model who should have perfect pronunciation of the sounds, perfect stress and intonation so that students would listen and imitate correctly.

Wells (1997) sees spelling pronunciation as the pronunciation of a word which is derived from or is influenced by its spelling. The converse of spelling- pronunciation is, “the creation of a new spelling form on the basis of the pronunciation. In a word such as the “tortoise”, traditionally articulated with a second syllable- /təs/, a new pronunciation with [...tɔis] or [...tɔiz] has arisen through the influence of spelling.

It is instructive to note that these instances of spelling pronunciation are divergence from Received Pronunciation (RP) and general American English (GAE) by native speakers, an indication that spelling pronunciation is (like non-native English) characteristics of speakers of standard native varieties of English. Indeed, Wells (1992) observes that there are many words that have undergone this process of spelling pronunciation which are currently in competition with the traditional form. Studies reveal that as new words develop, the process of spelling pronunciation differs in terms of their own socio-cultural and linguistic environment. Thus, spelling pronunciations are considered on the basis of its creativity, socio-cultural and linguistic context against the so called standardized model. The teacher plays vital role in inculcating correct habit that would guide and control the second language learners of English (ESL) through the use of contrastive analysis and other sound discrimination.

The fact that spelling pronunciation occurs in the English of both native and non-native speakers raises the issue of the suitability of the native models (RP, GA) as reference points for institutionalized varieties of non-native English.

Kachru (1992) has already argued strongly about the need for non-native speakers of English to avoid aiming at a close approximation of these native varieties especially RP. He draws our attention to the fact that these documented native models of English “no authority from government or a body of scholars as in the case, for example, with Spanish or French. (Kachru, 1992:49).

It is not a very useful exercise for a native model to be the determining factor for “proper” usage by non-native speakers. It is noteworthy that David Abercrombie, a native speaker and an accomplished British phonetician has shown the confusion RP has caused in England alone. He makes three points that are cited in Kachru (1992:51). First, that the concept of a standard pronunciation such as RP is “a bad rather than a good thing. It is an anachronism in present day democratic society.” Second, it provides an “accent bar” which does not reflect the social reality of England. And third, RP does not necessarily represent “educated English.” For while those who use RP consider themselves educated, they are outnumbered these days by the undoubtedly educated people who do not use RP.

The innovative features that characterize the pronunciation of non-native English are vast (including replacement of dental fricatives with stops, substitution of /a/ for /æ/, /a:/, /ʌ/, absence of the schwa /ə/, monothongization of diphthongs and triphthongs, consonant cluster simplification, to mention only but a few) and must be seen as the markers of our sociolinguistics and cultural identities. This brings us to the gap between letter and sound in English. Generally speaking, the principle of alphabetic writing is that each letter represents a particular spoken sound (phoneme) of the language. Because of this, many early systems of spelling were based on a one to one correspondence between the graphic representation and the spoken language.

In other words, Adetugbo (1977) and others however noted that as the pronunciation of many languages have undergone important changes over the centuries, the spelling did

not always keep the pace with these transformations. The gap between “the standard pronunciation of words and orthography in modern English is sometimes incredible.”

Giegerich (1992:37) observes that “a phoneme in English spelling may be represented by different letters in different words; or a single phoneme may be represented by a sequence of two letters, each of which may elsewhere denote a different phoneme.” Many more examples from English may be found, each one showing that the spelling of English is not suitable for the expression of phonemic distinctions in a clear one-to-one way. It may be helpful to give examples here: the letter /g/ is pronounced differently in words like *get* /get/, *gem* /dʒem/, *genre* /dʒɑ:n/. The letter /ch/ is pronounced in three different ways in words like *child* /tʃaɪld/, *charade* /ʃərə:d/, *character* /kærɪktə/. It is also quite difficult to account for the fact that words like *shy*, *mission*, *friction* and *ocean* use different letters: *sh*, *ss*, *ti*, *ce*, to represent one and the same phoneme /ʃ/. Similarly, words like *four*, *cuff*, *laugh*, *pharmacy*, and *lieutenants* use different letters to represent the same phoneme /f/. This inconsistent relationship between the sound of words and their spelling has had a great influence on the pronunciation of English words in varieties of non-native English especially in institutionalized varieties such as SNE, where L1 languages which learners are first exposed to before coming into contact with English have quite a different phonological structure.

Methodology

The study sample comprised final year senior secondary school students in five schools in Abakaliki Urban, Ebonyi State. The schools were selected on the basis of their performance in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The selected schools are a mixture of the best, average and poor schools. The subjects comprised of 50 Arts and 50 Science students respectively were randomly selected from the five schools.

The research instrument used in the study was 20 test designed items. The test items consisted of 50 words meant to test students' knowledge of spelling pronunciation. The words were dictated while the students were required to jot down the words in their exercise books (see the attached words or Appendix).

There were 100 completed test papers, which were scored, with 5 marks each allocated to correct response. The maximum score was 60%. The results, which formed the data were analysed using simple percentage form.

Results and Discussion

The data consisted of two sets of scores. One set being the scores of 50 Arts student and the other, those of 50 science students. The following table gives the frequency distribution of the scores and percentages scores.

Frequency Distribution of Scores

Scores	Group A (Arts)	Group B (Science)
1-10	3	12
11-20	5	10
21-30	6	14
31-40	10	6
41-50	12	5
51-60	14	3
Total	50	50

From table I above a total of 26 Arts students scored above (40%) as against science students who scored above 40% in the test dictation. While 24 Arts students scored

between 1-39, representing 48% of students who scored below average. On the other hand, 48 science students scored between 1-39 representing 84% and 16% above average score. 24 Arts students representing 51% scored above 40 average marks.

From the analysis, it is observed that a total of 32 students representing 64% of the total population had across of 40% and above while a total of 18 students representing 36% had below 40%. Based on this result, it can be stated that Arts students performed better in spelling pronunciation than the science students.

The findings reported in this study have show that many of the students have a fairly adequate knowledge of the expected English spelling pronunciation at their level. In addition, there was significant difference that exists between Arts students on One Hand and science students on the other. This suggests that student's area of specialization has direct relationship with their spelling pronunciation. However, this is open to further research.

The fact that many students performed better than expected could be explained on the basis of the school where they are placed. The implication here is that if students are given right exposure, they are likely to perform well in their spelling pronunciation than their fellow students. In the light of the foregoing discussion, there is need to include spelling pronunciation in the language curriculum both in the Nursery and Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria Schools. It is advocated that lessons on English phonemes should not only be included in the Nursery/Primary Schools Syllabus but should be given adequate priority.

English language is a dynamic subject, spelling pronunciation inclusive. As a matter of fact, teachers of English need to undergo in-service training or re-training programme from time to time to upgrade themselves. This training could be in the form of remedial

course, seminar or workshops whether experts in English phonology or native speakers would train them on the use of English Speech Sounds, spelling pronunciation etc.

Summary and Conclusion

In light of the problem so far identified in spelling pronunciation, there is need to include spelling pronunciation in the language curriculum both in the nursery/primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria schools. It is advocated that lessons on English phonemes should not only be included in the nursery/primary school syllabus but should be given adequate priority. Psycholinguistics have proved that one learns a second language with ease up till twelve years of age. After this, maturation sets in to render L2 learning especially pronunciation of words somewhat difficult.

English language is a dynamic subjects and spelling pronunciation inclusive. As a matter of fact, teachers of English need to undergo in-service or retraining programme from time to time to upgrade themselves. This training could be in form of remedial course, seminar or workshops where expert in English phonology or native speakers would train them on the use of English speech sounds, spelling pronunciation.

Atoye (1997) remarks, many Nigerians including graduates, highly educated individuals such as professionals and even university professors often pronounce English words wrongly especially in the area of phonemes. This wrong model of articulating speech sound gives dangerous signal to other ESL users. Therefore, there is need for various universities in the country to create centres for learning and upgrading lecturers in the area of speech sounds. This will go a long way in improving spelling pronunciation and enhance communication among secondary school students in Nigeria.

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