The Case of Unreleased Plosives by Ibibio Speakers of English: A Study of Performance by Undergraduates of Akwa Ibom State University

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Annotation: This research investigated the situation of non-release of English plosives by Ibibio speakers of English. Informants in the oral English test comprised ten students of the Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria. A list of six sentences containing words whose sounds are plosives was given to the informants to read. Their performances were recorded and played back several times for study and analysis. The students were randomly selected from all the four levels in the first degree English programme of the University. The theoretical bases were Applied Linguistics and Descriptive Linguistics. It was found out that Majority of Ibibio speakers of English have a problem releasing the plosives of English due to the surrounding sounds, position of occurrence, lack of interest and practice in the English plosives as well as mother tongue interference. I concluded that non-release of English plosives is a defective language behavior that can impede understanding and communication. I suggested interest and practice by students in English plosives and more training by lecturers.

Keywords: Plosives, phonology, patterning, fricatives, consonants, vowels, environment, position, occurrence, contrastive, voiced, voiceless, bilabial, alveolar, linguistics, framework, pronunciation, language, release, realization and nasal.

Introduction

Phonology has to do with the sound system of any particular language. The study of the occurrence of sounds and their patterning in any natural language is called phonology. Cruttenden (2014) states that phonology concerns how sounds function in a systemic way in a particular language. Eka (1996) describes patterning as the orderly or systematic arrangement (organization) of items, things, or units in a given field or in a specific activity. He avers that with reference to general language studies, the term (patterning) has often tended to be used in respect of organization into levels such as phonetic, phonological, syntactic, morphological or to phenomena within levels such as sounds and symbols, phonemes and allophones, system and structure, deep and surface structure, among others.

The phonology of English has two major divisions: segments and non-segments. Segmental phonology has two major characteristics: vowels and consonants. The consonants of English are divided into six categories: the plosives (stops), the fricatives, the affricates, the nasals, the liquids and the semi- vowels. This research is specifically concerned with the plosives. The study also has to with contrastive sounds in English phonology. According to https://en.m.Wikipedia.org. two sounds of a language are said to be in contrastive distribution if replacing one with the other in the same phonological environment results in a change of meaning. A sound in contrastive distribution is considered a phoneme in the language.

Specifically, this research is concerned with the type of sound in English phonology that is classified as plosives. Eka (1996) explain that, considering the manner of articulation, plosives can

be produced with the bringing together of the articulating organs and a sudden release of the sounds. Continuing, the source observes that in realization of the class of consonants called stops, there is generally a complete but temporary stoppage of breath and a relative movement of the articulatory organs. Consequently, the affricates (very close to the plosives in realization terms) are sometimes classified along with the stops proper resulting in an extension thus:

Stops: / p, b, t, d, k, g, dʒ, ʧ / (Eka, 1996, p. 26).

It should be noted that of the six plosives highlighted in this research, three are voiced:/b, d, g/ while three are voiceless:/ p, t, k/. The sounds may be more specifically described according to place of articulation and manner of articulation thus:

/p/ voiceless, bilabial plosive

/b/ voiced, bilabial plosive

/t/ voiceless, alveolar plosive

/d/ voiced, alveolar plosive

/k/ voiceless, velar plosive

/g/voiced, velar plosive

The concern of this research is the feature of unreleased plosives in the speech patterns of Ibibio speakers of English. The realization of plosives is tested in a connected speech. For the avoidance of doubt Ibibio is a tribe in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Ibibio commands the majority of the population in the State. Ibibio is the fourth largest tribe in Nigeria after Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. The word "Ibibio" first, is the name of the tribe and, second, is the name of the language. Genetically, Ibibio, as stated by Essien, O. E. (1990) belongs to the Benue-Congo sub-family, one of the largest families of language in Africa according to Greenberg's classification. Essien further classifies Ibibio under the Lower Cross Group, a group of closely related languages with which Efik and Annang form a cluster of dialects. Essien observes that Ibibio is spoken in Calabar, Akamkpa and Odukpani all in Cross River State. Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom State is clearly an Ibibio Local Government Area. Ibibio comprises the local government areas as follows: Etinan, Ibesikpo/Asutan, Ibiono Ibom, Ikono, Ikot Abasi, Itu, Mkpat Enin, Nsit Atai, Nsit Ibom, Nsit Ubium, Onna, Uruan and Uyo. These local government areas speak Ibibio centrally. Eket, Esit Eket, Ibeno and Estern Obolo speak dialects of Ibibio and speak Ibibio fluently as second mother tongue. Greater part of Ini Local Government Area speaks Ibibio as their mother tongue but a section speaks Itu Mbonuso as L$_1$. (Okono, 2006, p.5).

The Local Government Areas: Abak, Etim Ekpo, Essien Udim, Ika, Ikot Ekpene, obot Akara, Oruk Anam and Ukanafun speak Annang which has the slightest dialectal differences with Ibibio, The Southern flank of Akwa Ibom State is occupied by Oron, Okobo, Mbo, Udung Uko and Urue-Offong Oruko Local Government Areas. These people speak languages that are mutually unintelligible with Ibibio. Oron, Udung Uko and Urue-Offong Oruko speak Oro; Okobo people speak Okobo and Mbo speak Mbo. Similarly, Eket and Esit Eket Local Government Areas speak Ekid and Ibeno speak Ibeno. Eastern Obolo on the shore of Atlantic Ocean between Ibeno and Western Obolo in Rivers State speak Obolo. The language situation in Akwa Ibom State is that all the local government areas outside areas classified as Central Ibibio speak Ibibio language effortlessly and understand it spontaneously when spoken to. This is why the languages spoken in Akwa Ibom State can be regarded as closely related dialects.

Ibibio language is the approved medium of instruction in the primary school. It is examined as a separate subject in examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examination Council (NECO) and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board(JAMB). It is studied as a discipline from the bachelor's degree to doctorate in the universities, polytechnics and colleges across Nigeria.

It has generally been observed that Ibibio speakers of English exhibit unreleased plosive in their speech in English. Ipso facto, the concern of this paper is to investigate the magnitude of this language situation in terms of its tendency to impede understanding, and by extension communication. The paper will also suggest ways of suppressing this feature with a view to improving the English speech of an Ibibio speaker in respect of English plosives. The desire of this research is to see how to enable Ibibio speakers communicate intelligibly in English language at both national and international levels.

Methodology

Ten students (informants) of Ibibio origin were randomly selected in the Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria. The informants were given a list of six sentences to read. Each sentence contained words that have one plosive to be tested. Some sentences contained more than one plosives that can be used for analysis. The performances of the informants were recorded with android phone (Infinix Hot 10T). The informants were coded A to J and the reading of each informant was played back several times for proper listening and analysis of the sounds. Each appropriate pronunciation of an informant was scored 1 while ban inappropriate production was scored 0. Simple percentages are used to calculate the scores of participants. Four males and six females participated in the exercise. Four informants are in the final year; three are in year three; two are in year two; and one is in year one.

Quantitative and Qualitative Limitations

Only six plosives out of 24 consonants are studied and the consideration is on phonemic realizations of the plosives.

Theoretical Framework

The major theoretical base for this research is Applied Linguistics. Schmitt Norbert (2013) sees Applied Linguistics as using what we know about (a) language (b) how it is used in order to achieve some purpose or solve some problems in the real world. Similarly, Lyons (1981) avers that applied linguistics is a subfield of linguistics which has as its concerns the application of the concepts and findings of linguistics to a variety of practical tasks. According to Okono (2019) one of the principal tasks of the linguist is to describe languages in a scientific fashion. This activity and the development of the techniques required for its practice can be called descriptive linguistics. Consequently, descriptive linguistics is another theory which is relevant to this research. Dineen (1966) observes that a course in descriptive linguistics usually includes training in phonetics as well in phonological and grammatical analysis. In this arrangement, units, categories, descriptive techniques, their value and justification come from a general theory of language founded on a good deal of experience in scientific description of languages. Okono (2019) observes that Dineen sees interdependence between descriptive and general, or theoretical linguistics whereby each unit must be constantly revised in the light of the other. The two theories highlighted are relevant to this work in terms of training of students in the pronunciation of English plosives, their actual performance, observation and analysis of their performance as well as testing them on the language features and research into their inappropriate patterns of language use.

Data Analysis

Table 2 shows that informant G secured the highest score of 66.7 % in her pronunciation test on English plosives. She was able to appropriately release the /p/ in "foolscap", /b/ in "taxicab", /t/ in "start" and /d/ in "dead". The next high score of 50% was clinched by informants A, E and J. Informant A released the /t/ in "start" /d/ in "dead" and /k/ in "bake". Similarly, informant E released the /t/ in "start" /d/ in "dead" and /k/ in "brake" while informant J released the /p/ in "foolscap", /d/ in "dead" and /k/ in "bake". Five informants: B,C,F,H and I scored 33.3%. Informant B released /d/ "dead" and /k/ in "bake"; informant C released /t/ in "start" and /g/ in "agog" ; informant F produced the complete plosive /p/ in "foolscap" and /t/ in "start"; informant H released /t/ in "start" and /k/ in "bake" ; and informant I released full /d/ in "dead" and full /k/ sound in "bake". The lowest performance came from informant D who could only articulate full plosive /d/ in "dead". The data are presented in the tables below:

Table 1. Showing Sentences, Words and Sounds

S/n	Sentences	Words	Sounds
1	The students were told to write the test in foolscap sheets	foolscap	/p/
2	Please, where can I find a taxicab	taxicab	/b/
3	The lecturer ordered the students to start the examination at 8 o'clock	start	/t/
4	By the time I arrived I found the dog already dead	dead	/d/
5	At the age of 15 I was taught how to bake bread	bake	/k/
6	The crowd went agog when the Governor arrived	agog	/g/

Table 2. Showing Informants' Performance in English Plosives

S/n	Informants	Sound/Score						Total	%
1	A	/p/ o	/b/ o	/t/ √	/d/ √	/k/ √	/g/ o	3	50
2	B	/p/ o	/b/ o	/t/ o	/d/ √	/k/ √	/g/ o	2	33.3
3	C	/p/ o	/b/ o	/t/ √	/d/ o	/k/ o	/g/ √	2	33.3
4	D	/p/ o	/b/ o	/t/ o	/d/ √	/k/ o	/g/ o	1	16.7
5	E	/p/ o	/b o	/t/ √	/d/ √	/k/ √	/g/ o	3	50
6	F	/p/ √	/b/ o	/t/ √	/d/ o	/k/ o	/g/ o	2	33.3
7	G	/p/ √	/b/ √	/t/ √	/d/ √	/k/ o	/g/ o	4	66.7
8	H	/p/ o	/b/ o	/t/ √	/d/ o	/k/ √	/g/ o	2	33.3
9	I	/p/ o	/b/ o	/t/ o	/d √	/k/ √	/g/ o	2	33.3
10	J	/p/ √	/b/ o	/t/ o	/d/ √	/k √	/g/ o	3	50
	Total:	3	1	6	7	6	1		

Discussion

The test used for this study contained words in a connected speech. Normally the realization of sounds in isolation is different from the production of sounds in a connected speech. This is because of the influence of the surrounding sounds. Cruttenden (2014) observes that speech is a continuum of sound therefore describing a speech sound in isolation is done purely in phonetic terms. This approach according to Cruttenden will have the problems of identification and delimitation of the sound unit (or segment) to be described and treated for the purpose of linguistic analysis, as if they were the same. Cruttenden notes that in any investigation of speech, it is on the

physiological and acoustic levels that most information is available to us. Continuing, he avers that in any articulation as revealed by moving fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging)-essentially, a video produced from a series of MRI images, an utterance consists of apparently continuous movements by a very large number of organs; it is almost impossible to say, simply from a video of the speech organs at work, how many speech sounds have been uttered. Cruttenden states that a display of acoustic information is slightly easier to handle. But he further argues that even here it is not always possible to delimit exactly the beginning and the end of sound segments because of the way in which many sounds merge into one another.

The above observation happens to the realization of alveolar nasal/n/ by Nigerian speakers of English. There is always an overflowing influence over the vowel and the palato-alveolar affricate such that the realization of manager: /'mæn☐dʒə(r)/ becomes /'mæn☐ndʒə(r)/. The same thing is likely to happen to the articulation of /b/ in "taxicab" and /g/ in "agog". The preceding vowel /æ/ to the plosive /b/ and /ɒ/ to the plosive /g/ could cause the difficulty of releasing the plosives in a connected speech. Informant C released the /g/ in "agog" while informant G released /b/ in "taxicab". Both plosives occurred in word-final and sentence-final positions. However, the influence of the initial consonants: /k/ in "taxicab" and /g/ in "agog" cannot be immediately estimated. From the angle of interference, Ibibio language, the L_1 of the informants has a good number of unreleased plosives such as kʌp inua mfo : shut up your mouth, ubọk: hand, bad : count. The plosives; /b/, /k/, /d/ are naturally not released in Ibibio, and, consequently, this language behavior could affect the pronunciation of English.

Seven out of ten informants released the voiced alveolar plosive /d/ in "dead". Surprisingly, all the informants released the same sound in "bread" in sentence 5. The three informants that failed to release the /d/ may have been affected by L_1 influence. In another instance, the high performance on this sound may be due to the contiguous sounds and the physical properties of the sound.

Six of the ten informants released /t/ in "start" and five informants released /k/in "bake". The appropriate pronunciation by these informants could be due to practice in the use of these segments, after all, the informants are all students of the Department of English who have had formal drills on the sounds. Such drills have always been carried out by English language lecturers to overcome mother tongue interference among other factors. Those who failed may perhaps have paid less attention to the appropriate realization of these sounds in English. It should also be noted that the two sounds are voiceless sounds just as the most difficult /b/ and /g/ are voiced sounds. Three informants successfully released /p/ in "foolscap". This shows some degree of training in the pronunciation of the segment. Majority i.e. seven informants failed to release the plosive due perhaps to lack of attention to the phoneme allowing the speech habits of the L_1 to dominate their pronunciation. Overall, informant G did well as she clinched 66.7 % in the reading test. It shows the degree of exposure to and training in this aspect of the language. She is exact opposite of informant D who scored only 16.7 % meaning that he released only one plosive out of six attempts, and that plosive was /d/ in "dead". This informant is highly influenced by the speech habits of his L_1.

Conclusion

The pronunciation by Ibibio speakers of English is affected by factors such as surrounding segments, physical properties of the plosives and position of occurrence and the last but not the least, L_1 influence. These factors may be overcome, by paying more attention to the pronunciation of these sounds, regular practice and more training by experts. If these things are done, Ibibio speakers of English are likely to achieve a release of English plosives and, as a result, communicate

better in the language both internally and internationally. Non-release of plosives by Ibibio speakers of English is a defective language behavior which can impede understanding and communication particularly before an international audience.

Recommendations

I recommend regular practice on English plosives, adequate training by English lecturers and pronunciation of English sounds (plosives) in informal conversations by students.

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