

The phonotactics of English Coda: A Case Study of Yemeni Speakers of English

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Introduction

The Arabic language phonology system plays an important role in the production of second language phonology of Arab speakers of English, particularly with regard to language transfer. This notion can be seen in Ellis (1994: 316) as he points out that "there is a widespread recognition that transfer is more pronounced at the level of the sound system than at the level of syntax". The salient aim of this paper is to provide insights into the pronunciation of English phonotactics by Yemeni university students.

Related Literature

Some of the major phonological problems associated with the pronunciation of English language by Yemeni speakers of English can be attributed to the interfering effect of the mother tongue on one hand (Abu-Rabia and Kehat, 2004) and English phonological phonotactics on the other hand. Moreover, previous studies have demonstrated that some factors in a syllable of a particular language stand as phonotactic constraints (see Fery and de Vijver, 2003). Fery and de Vijver's (2003: 18) analysis, based on Blevin (1995), illustrates that this problem is due to "consonant clusters". Crystal (1997:65) defines consonant clusters as "a term used in the analysis of connected speech to refer to any sequence of adjacent consonants occurring initially or finally in a syllable, such as the initial [br] of *bread*, or the final [-st] of *best*".

Sahu (1999) argues that EFL Yemeni learners demonstrate a lack of competence in their pronunciation of words. He remarks the following:

"A vast majority of learners across grade levels have demonstrated, during in-class and out-of-class interactions, a shaky and perfunctory command of English and those, who seem to possess some competence in the language, make frequent violations of the acceptable grammatical norms, rendering most of their utterances minimally acceptable. In so far as most of their utterances are phonologically flawed, they are, to a considerable extent, unintelligible as well".

Rababah (2003) asserts that many Arab learners have certain difficulties in speaking especially with regard to pronunciation and phonological errors. He cited different learners from different Arab countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan and Jordan. He attributes these difficulties to several reasons, i.e. students start learning English language at level 7; language teachers are native speakers of Arabic; Arabic

is used everywhere and English is not used in daily situations, etc. In brief, the literature (see Abu-Rabia and Kehat, 2004; Rababah, 2003; Sahu, 1999) shows that there is a consensus that the pronunciation of English phonotactics constitutes difficulties in speaking not only for Yemeni university students but also for Arab university students.

Methodology

Interlanguage Theory is adopted as a framework for the present study, since it "offers a general account of how L2 acquisition takes place" (Ellis, 1997: 34). As far as the method for data collection is concerned, Labovian model was utilised. This method is basically based on the sociolinguistic model developed by Labov (1966) and extended by Dickerson (1974). Alias Abd Ghani (2003: 115) states that the Labovian model "emphasises the significant influence of inner psychological (mental) processes upon individual speakers' patterns of stylistic variation". He goes on to add that this model "aims at describing accurately the systematically variable patterns of a speaker's speech production in a multiplicity of situations" (p. 115).

The subjects in this study are 10 postgraduate students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). They are all native speakers of Arabic from Yemen. The subjects are similar as they were exposed to English in their native country, Yemen. Their ages range from 29 to 44 years old.

The stimuli for this study are nine words used in the two tasks of Labovian model: word list reading and passage reading. The stimuli are: *ethics*, *linguistics*, *terms*, *breasts*, *tempt*, *text*, *attempts*, *tempts* and *texts*. However, the passage reading was adapted into the mode of separate sentences. This adaptation is based on the same method employed by Monahan (2001).

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that Yemeni speakers of English insert a vowel sound within the three positions of English codas (CC, CCC and CCCC). For instance, the words *terms*, *tempts* and *texts* were pronounced as /tɜ:məs/, /tempət/ and /tekəstɪs/ consecutively. This phenomenon of vowel insertion has been found varying in the three positions of the English coda and each position has different patterns of phonotactics. The types of vowels which have been found in the English coda were /ə/ and /ɪ/. However, the former occurs more often than the latter. Apart from

the phenomenon of vowel insertion, other phenomena that occurred include the processes of “substitution”, “reduction” and “deletion”.

The word list reading, in fact, shows the state of consciousness of the subjects. They appeared vigilant and are conscious of their pronunciation while reading the words. The passage reading, on the other hand, shows the state of casualty/unconsciousness. This suggests that the subjects did not pay attention to pronunciation when they articulated the words. In other words, it can be said that the subjects articulated the words spontaneously in the case of passage reading while for word list reading the subjects paid more attention since these words are rendered to them individually.

Therefore, the second task of the Labovian method in this study, that is passage reading, shows its effectiveness on getting the real situation and the state of articulation of Yemeni speakers of English more than the first task, word list reading. Hence, the inaccurate production of pronunciation for the words in the syllable-final consonant clusters in the three positions in the passage reading recorded a higher percentage than in the word list reading. In brief, passage reading demonstrated its effectiveness much more than the word list reading. To sum up, the most significant finding is that the subjects face greater difficulty of articulation when there are more consonant sounds in a syllable.

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Conclusion

Feedback gathered from the study would enable Yemeni university students to know how to correct their pronunciation of English. In turn, they would be able to improve their speech performance. This study will assist these speakers in producing fluent and accurate pronunciation of English with special regard to syllables while speaking English language.

Recommendations

Since pronunciation plays a vital role in speaking skill, being conversant of such errors as demonstrated in the findings would help teachers to rectify mispronunciations of their students and their own as well. The findings of the study are deemed significant to both teachers and students and could provide important rules to follow in the pronunciation of words in the target language. In short, the findings could be taken as a reference for students as well as teachers of English toward the production of correct English pronunciation.

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