ESL Learners' English Pronunciation Errors: A Systematic Error rather than Accidental

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Abstract - *ESL learners of English language encounter problems in producing correct pronunciation of the English words. This study determined the pronunciation errors on English vowel, consonant and digraph sounds among BS Psychology students. This study employed face – to – face oral pronunciation test. Mispronunciation was looked into as a result of the interference of L1 pronunciation. L1 phonological sounds have fossilized in the phonological knowledge of the ESL learners. Lastly, the spelling structure of the words gives confusion to the learners to pronounce the words. This concluded that pronunciation errors are systematic. This also led to a recommendation that teaching pronunciation should be given an intensive focus for enhancing the pronunciation errors and difficulty of the ESL learners.*

General Terms – *ESL, pronunciation error, English language, systematic error*

Keywords - *vowel; consonant; digraphs; L1; phonology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation instruction is a prominent factor in second language teaching since sound production of words play an important role in communication process. Filipino students as ESL learners of English language encounter problems in producing correct pronunciation of the English vowel, consonant and digraphs sounds and so it leads to negative effect on oral communication. No matter how the ESL learners would like to pronounce the words correctly and appropriately, there are barriers that would hinder their aim to do so. This study determined the pronunciation errors on English vowel, consonant and digraph sounds

Speakers may produce an utterance to mean something that does not mean anything; the result is intelligibility problem and it is because of mispronunciation of words (Derwing and Munro, 2009)[9]. Notable changes in terms of teaching methodologies and approaches have been introduced to facilitate effectively the teaching of English pronunciation as a second language. English pronunciation is considered to be one of the most difficult and challenging skills to acquire and to be developed among learners (Martínez-Flor, et al. 2006[20]; Aliaga García, 2007 [1]).

Pronunciation is a set of habits of producing sounds. "The habit of producing a sound is acquired by repeating it over and over again and by being corrected when it is pronounced wrongly. Learning to pronounce a second language means building up new pronunciation habits and overcoming the bias of the first language" (Cook,1996)[6]. Difficulty or problems that would occur in pronunciation skill may be due to a number of factors, e.g. the irregular correspondence between spelling and pronunciation and

the impact on the learning process of factors such as age, motivation and amount of exposure to the L2. However, the importance of sounds for effective communication means that foreign language teachers need to emphasize pronunciation teaching in their classes Hariri, 2012 [13]. It is important to note that communication is a mutual relationship between the speaker and the hearer. This means that learners must be able to comprehend and understand what they hear in the target language and must produce the sounds correctly of the language they try to learn accurately (Elmaksoud, 2013)[10].

If learners in the second language have sufficient and adequate knowledge of the sound patterns of the English language, learners will be able to interpret the message properly and there will be a less struggle during their communication processes. "Therefore, pronunciation instruction is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place since it is an important ingredient of the communicative competence" (Hismanoglu, 2006)[15].

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Learning to speak English fluently is a difficult skill for students to develop and learn, especially in second language acquisition learners' context, where in exposure to English is limited and where chances and opportunities to speak communicatively are also limited. Gass and Selinker (2001)[12] refer to three primary sources of input for foreign language learners: "(a) teacher, (b) materials, and (c) other learners". "The increasing demand for global competence and international communication and collaboration makes attaining proficiency in a second or

foreign language more prominent and this proficiency should cover not merely vocabulary and grammar, but good pronunciation as well" (Lord, 2008:374-389).

Various teaching strategies were used to stimulate student motivation to determine and improve their pronunciation skill. According to Calfee, et. al. (1969) those students who encountered difficulty in pronunciation tend to become poor readers as they would commit errors. Students especially in tertiary level still commit errors in pronunciation that would lead them to hardly recognize words when they read. Students tend to become anxious when they read as they are not sure on how to pronounce the words. As mentioned by Chard, et al (2000) English is an alphabetic language in that there is an orderly relationship between the phonemes (sounds) that are part of the oral form of language and the graphemes (letters and letter combinations such as "sh" and "th") that make up the printed form of the language. Learners must be aware of sounds, or phonemes, of the spoken form of the language (phonemic awareness), and they must become very familiar with the letters of the alphabet (orthographic familiarity).

Many studies in the field of (SLA) discussed intensively the factors that hinder achieving native-like pronunciation among foreign languages learners in general and among Sudanese learners in particular (O'Connor, 2003 [22]; Yule, 2003[25]). Researchers and linguists have pointed some linguistic factors such as the differences of the sound system between the (LI) and the (L2), the inconsistency of some sounds in English language, the mother tongue interference and the influence of spelling on pronunciation. Hassan (2014)[14] investigated the problems in English pronunciation experienced by learners whose first language is Sudanese Spoken Arabic. Findings revealed that factors such as interference, differences in the sound system in the two languages, inconsistency of English sounds and spelling are the contributing factors for pronunciation errors of Sudanese Students. As a result, it causes to decline their competence in pronunciation. Many studies have demonstrated that the errors made by the speakers of other languages, who speak English, are something systematic rather than random. Moosa (1972)[21] and Homeidan (1984)[16] demonstrated that Arab students face problem in the pronunciation of sounds which the students are not familiar with.

A study conducted by Elmaksoud (2013)[10] revealed that during the pre – test on pronunciation test it was found out that the students obtained a low level skill in terms of their pronunciation skill on vowel and digraphs sounds. Students were determined to commit errors in producing correctly the vowel and digraphs sounds. Further, Moats (2010) various errors in vowel, consonant and digraph sounds were identified such as substitution of vowel sounds, mispronounced long /i/ and short /i/ sounds, complex consonants and syllable juncture. It was indicated in her study that 'students may be aware of phonemes, but may lack knowledge or understanding of the phoneme-grapheme correspondence system of English, and/or the

written syllable patterns in English and their assembly in longer words.' Errors became evident due to mispronounced vowel or consonant sounds in a multiple words structure. Another factor that took account on the preponderance of errors in the pronunciation indicates the lack of awareness of morphemes and these are the prefixes, suffixes, root words and combining forms, word origin and the relationship between meaning and spelling.

In synonymous to Filipino ESL learners, many of the English vowels, consonant and digraphs sounds are far different from the mother – tongue or first language of the respondents. Difficulty and erroneous pronunciation of words would seem affect their communication process. an important consideration that need to look into when it comes to pronunciation errors or difficulty is that, it is systematic but not accidental. Pronunciation instruction is a major factor in foreign or in second language teaching. Proper sounds production of words play a vital role in communication process especially to ESL learners and English language teachers must therefore, attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation of vowel, consonant and digraphs sounds. In a final note, intelligibility when it comes to pronunciation is necessary aspect of all communication. If learners cannot produce the sounds accurately, the production of the sounds of words will be affected and as a result communication process will also fail.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design
This study utilized a qualitative research design. Face – to – face pronunciation test was conducted to determine the English vowel, consonant and digraph sounds phonological error and difficulty.

3.2 Respondents
The respondents of this study were the 3rd year BS Psychology students of College of Arts and Sciences, Samar State University.

3.3 Instruments
The researcher used the instruments which are: List of Consonant, Vowel and Digraphs sounds word lists.
A. Consonant and vowel sounds instrument was adopted from Fore, et al (2005)[11] from their study on 'Phonetics and Phonology: Reader for First Year English Linguistics.
B. Digraph sounds was adopted from 'Lancashire Primary Literacy Book' entitled Supporting Children's Phonics and Reading.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure
To elicit the phonological errors committed by the respondents, the researcher conducted a face – to – face oral pronunciation test on English vowel, consonant and digraphs sounds. The oral
pronunciation test was recorded and the mispronounced sounds were taken down notes.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

I. Pronunciation difficulty of ESL learners in English vowel sounds (Commonly mispronounced vowel sounds)

Sounds Feature	Examples of Words (Target sounds)	Sounds Produced by the Respondents
Vowel sounds	p*i*t /I/	p*e*t /e/
		p*ee*t /i/
	p*u*t /ʊ/	p*o*t /ɒ/
		p*oo*t /u:/
	c*u*r /u:/	c*e*r /e/
		c*a*r /ɒ/
	*a*bout /ə/	*a*bout /ɒ/
		*a*bout /æ/
	g*o* /əʊ/	g*ow* /ow/
	k*ey* /i/	k*i* /I/
		k*e* /e/
	p*a*t /æ/	p*o*t /ɒ/
		p*aw*t /ɔ/
	p*ea*r /eə/	p*ee*r /i/
		p*e*r /e/
		p*a*r /ɒ/
	p*u*tt /ʌ/	p*o*t /ɒ/
		p*ow*t /ow/
	b*ay* /eI/	b*ee* /i/
	p*oo*r /ʊə/	p*u*r /u:/
		p*aw*r /ɔ/
	c*o*re /ɔ/	c*oo*r /u;/
		c*ow*r /aw/
	c*oo* /u:/	c*o*h /ɔ/

From the recorded oral pronunciation test, it revealed that majority of the respondents committed errors in producing accurately the vowel sound such as short and long /i/ and /I/, /u:/ and /ʊ/, /eə/ and /e/. /æ/,/ə/ and /ɔ/ , /ɔ/ and /ow/.Based on the observation, respondents were confused in producing the sounds because they were not sure on the correct sounds of the vowels. They would pause for a seconds and tried to repeat reading the words but in the end students still did not able to pronounce the vowels correctly. There are some English vowel sounds are not present in the first language or mother tongue of the respondents and as a result, this affects on the production of the sounds. Moreover, they would interchange the long sounds into short sounds e.g. /I/ as in p*i*t pronounced as /i/

as in p*ee*t and /æ/ as in p*a*t but respondents committed error by pronouncing the word as /ɒ/ as in p*o*t.

II. Pronunciation difficulty of ESL learners in English consonant sounds (Commonly mispronounced consonant sounds)

Sounds Feature	Examples of Words (Target sounds)	Sounds Produced by the Respondents
Consonant sounds	*p*ea /p/	*ph*e /ph/
	*t*oe /t/	*th*oe /θ/
	fat /f/	*p*at /p/
	*th*ing /θ/	*t*ing /t/
	*s*ip /s/	*z*ip /z/
	*sh*ip /ʃ/	*ch*ip /tʃ/
	*n*ap /n/	*m*ap /m/
	*ch*in /tʃ/	*sh*in /ʃ/
	*b*ee /b/	*v*e /v/
	*th*is /ð/	dis /d/
	mea*s*ure /ʒ/	mea*s*ure /s/
	*g*in /dʒ/	*j*in /j/

Based from the presentation above, respondents committed errors in /f/ as /p/, /p/ as /b/, others use /s/ for /θ/ and /z/ for /ð/ and /b/ for /v/, /ʒ/ as /s/, /s/ as /z/, /θ/ as /t/ and /ð/ as /t/ or /d/. Respondents were confused and tend to stutter especially in producing the sounds of /tʃ/, /s/ and /ʃ/. These two digraphs sounds were noted as the most difficult sounds. Another observation was if words are composed of two or more phonemes or multiple spelled words, the respondents are having difficulty in producing the sounds. One of the most common factors that affect the pronunciation skill of ESL learners are other sounds which are the influence by the mother tongue of foreign learners (Gruttenden, 1994). Brown (2000)[3] found out that a second language learner meets some difficulties, because his LI affects his L2 especially in adulthood, and this effect is a result of LI transfer; so it is a significant source of making errors for second language learners.

On the similar note by Moosa (1972)[21] stated that the Arab learners of English form habits of their mother tongue (Arabic), so they strongly build the phonological features of Arabic; this makes them encounter many difficulties in distinguishing sound systems between a native language and the second language. For the SSA, the problem from two perspectives, the first one is that there is a difference between the sound system in Sudanese Spoken Arabic and the sound system in other forms of Arabic language, and the second one is that there is also a difference between the sound system in Sudanese Spoken Arabic, and the sounds system in English language.

Several works have been conducted on the influence of L2 in learning English language (Catford, 1977), (Moosa, 1972)[21] and (Swan; Smith, 2001)[24] reported that /p/ and /b/ sounds are two different phonemes and each one is distinguished by a native speaker.

III. Pronunciation difficulty of ESL learners in English digraphs sounds (Commonly mispronounced digraphs sounds)

Sounds Feature	Examples of Words (Target sounds)	Sounds Produced by the Respondents
Digraphs sounds	*ch*in /tʃ/	*s*in /s/ *sh*in /ʃ/
	*qu*ality /kwa/	*qa*lity /ka/
	*sh*eep /ʃ/ *sh*rimp /ʃ/	*ch*ip /tʃ/ *s*rimp /s/
	thri*ll* /l/	tri*n* /n/
	th*igh* /ay/	t*ey*g /ey/
	wi*th* /ð/	wi*t* /t/
	ki*ng* /ŋ/	ki*n* /n/

As indicated above based from the oral test conducted, majority of the respondents committed errors in digraphs sounds. Digraphs sounds are words that are made up of combinations of consonants and vowel sounds or both consonant and vowel sounds. Frequent stuttering and substitution of sounds were noticed during the oral test. The respondents were confused on the sounds /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ since these sounds are again not present in their mother tongue sounds. Respondents cannot distinguish the differences between the sounds mentioned above and they usually use /s/ sounds than /ʃ/. Another factor that affects the pronunciation of the respondents is the influence of spelling on pronunciation. Respondents committed errors due to spelling system. For them, each letter represents sounds and so they would try to read each sound while reading words and so, it became erroneous.

5. RESULTS

Power (2003) found out that there are 23 common pronunciation problems, some of them are related to vowels which the students are confuse with /I/ and /i:/ as in sit, seat, and /ɔ/ with /əu/ as in not, note and / æ/ with /ei/ as in mat, mate and /e/ with /ei/ as in let, late. It has been noted that many words in English have letters, which are not pronounced unlike with their first language all letters in words are being pronounced. Yule (2001)[25] mentioned that the sounds of spoken English do not match up, a lot of time, with letters of written English. As second language speakers, if students cannot use the letters of the alphabet in a consistent way to represent the sounds which they usually make, it is difficult to describe the sounds of a

language like English. According to Hassan (2014)[14], in English, there are twenty-four consonants and twenty vowels; if we give to each of these forty- four units a special letter, in that way undoubtedly we can show what the student should say. If the learner knows that each letter represents a certain sound (e.g. equal number of sounds to the letters), he can simply avoid the difficulty of spelling on pronunciation.

The first language or the mother tongue of the respondents which is the waray – waray would have a big difference to English sounds. There are vowel, consonant and digraphs sounds which are not present from the mother tongue sounds of the respondents. In mother tongue production of sounds, the usual sounds are /p/, /b/, /t/, /ɒ/ and /u:/. Since these sounds are already fossilized in the production sound system of the respondents, these sounds would affect in pronouncing English words.

The mispronunciation of the above sounds is the result of the over practice of the first language, a process of fossilization. The adults vocal musculature is set to pronounce foreign sounds with an accent (Yule and O'Connor, 2003)[22] reported that the main problem of English pronunciation is to build a new set of sounds corresponding to the sounds of English, and to break down the arrangement of sounds which the habits and the systems of our LI have strongly built up. And that means we use new ways of hearing and new ways of using our organs of speech.

So it is too difficult to change such habits which a learner has obtained since his childhood or at least it needs very long years to be changed and after also very long time and regular practice, and all that is linked to a certain age of the learner. The learners confuse such sounds and replace each of them with other sounds that are said to be the nearest ones to them (O'Connor, 2003)[22].

According to Hassan (2014) some words that may lead to confusion to the students are those words which are ordinarily spelt in the same way but different in their pronunciation, for example lead which is pronounced /Ii:d/ in a phrase like, lead the way, but /led/ in another phrase lead pipe and also read (in simple present tense) pronounced as /rid/ but if we used the word read (in past tense) we read the word as /red/. Also there are some words spelt differently, but sound the same e.g. rain, rein, reign, all of them are pronounced /rein/.

6. DISCUSSION

Ladefoged (2001)[18]; Carter & Nunan (2001)[5] proved that mother tongue has clear influence on learning L2 pronunciation which is very dominant during the oral test conducted to the respondents and where LI and L2 rules are in conflict, errors are expected to be committed by foreign learners. All that can be linked to what is known as the interference between LI and L2. So many learners use /p/ as /b/, others use /s/ for /θ/ and /z/ for /ð/ and /b/ for /v/ (O'Connor, 2003[22]; Yule, 2003) have studied pronunciation problems and the influence of LI. So many

sounds such as /p/ and /b/, /s/ and /θ/, /z/ and /ð/, /tʃ/ and /ʃ/, /v/ and /b/ are confused e.g. (pit / bit), (thin / sin), (question /action), (very / berry). Same pronunciations were encountered by the respondents.

Inconsistency of English Vowels is one of the important problems faced by Filipino students of English in particular and knowing the fact that English vowel sounds have more than just one pronunciation. For example, the vowel letter 'a' comprises of many sounds such as /æ/, /ɒ/, /ɔ/ and /a/. As a result, this causes many difficulties to the learners and leads them to a mispronunciation.

The learner who still does not have the mastery of pronunciation of such words, pronounces each of them by looking at its spelling, and he is expected to mispronounce them (O'Connor, 2003)[22].

As an observation, the respondents encountered words consisting of digraphs sounds or combination of different phonemes and they were confused to pronounce the words correctly and tend to guess the pronunciation by looking at the spelling structure of the words.

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7. CONCLUSION

1. It was noticed that ESL learners encountered errors and pronunciation difficulty recognizing the sounds of English vowel sounds. Mispronunciation was looked into as a result of the interference of L1 pronunciation since the L1 of the ES learners which is waray – waray only uses the most common and dominant vowel sounds like /ɒ/, /u:/ and /i/. These sounds affect the way they pronounce the English vowel sounds because the L1 phonological sounds have fossilized already in the phonological knowledge of the ESL learners. These errors were noticeable in mostly of the respondents since speech organ positions were also observed as contributing factor in the pronunciation difficulty of the ESL learners.

2. English consonant words such as /b/, /p/, /s/, /θ/, /ð/, t/, /v/, /f/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ were frequently mispronounced sounds. It can also be concluded that many of the respondents have problems in the pronunciation of the voiceless bilabial /p/ and the voiced bilabial /b/ and labiodentals voiceless /f/ and voiced /v/. According to various studies on pronunciation error and difficulty of many of the students, students would substitute /p/ with /b/ or /b/ with /p/ and /v/ to /f/.

3. ESL learners' pronunciation errors in terms of digraphs sounds is due to their difficulty to discriminate the individual phonemes within the adjacent consonants or vowel sounds. For example, the difference between /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ are subtle for the learners to hear and pronounce the words. This adds to the spelling structure of the words that gives confusion to the learners to pronounce the words especially if they are not familiar with the words or if it is their first time to encounter the words and they became struggling reading and pronouncing the words correctly.

4. Lastly, pronunciation errors or difficulty is systematic but not accidental.

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