

THE PRONUNCIATION OF ENGLISH LONG VOWEL SOUNDS BY FINAL YEAR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH OF AKWA IBOM STATE UNIVERSITY.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pronunciation of English long vowel sounds by the final year students of English. Fifty (50) final year students of the Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University were given a reading test containing words with the long vowel sounds. They were selected through a purposive sampling method. The analysis was done using Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle 1950 Generative Phonology. The study reveals that words not properly articulated could give a wrong meaning in the context used. For instance, when words which have long sounds are articulated as if they are short, as in beat and bit, feet and fit among others. Findings also reveal that absence of long sounds in the indigenous languages also posed a problem to the respondents, as some of them tend to use the doubling of the sound to create the lengthening effect. In addition, it also showed that respondents adopted the deletion, assimilation and the insertion rules of Generative Phonology while articulating words with these sounds. The paper concludes that if the respondents make a conscious and committed effort towards learning these sounds, there is a possibility that they could improve on their pronunciation as students in the Department of English.

KEY WORDS: Pronunciation, Long Vowels, Length Effect, Generative Phonology, Assimilation, Insertion and Deletion.

INTRODUCTION

In every language, proper sound articulation enhances effective communication (Utin, 2016) and appropriate comprehension of what is spoken. Language as unique and dynamic as it is, plays an important role in the lives of humans. It is a vehicle through which human communication and interaction are achieved. Without language, information and communication (Utin, 2016) among humans are hindered. Every language has its own sound system which it employs for the purpose of communication. The English language has two major sound systems namely: consonant and vowel sounds. A lot of studies have been carried out in this area. Among them include: Eka(1996), Enang, E. T, Nyarks, A. I., Utin, I.D., Udoka, S.T.& Udom, M.E.(2014), Udofot & Eshiet(1993), Udodata(2001), Udodata(2017), Udoka, Enang & Utin(2018), Utin(2023). Weinreich (1953).

Learning a second language comes with some problems such as spellings, pronunciation, Mother tongue interference among others. Pronunciation and articulation of words pose a great problem to second language learners at different levels. Hayes (2009:p.18) observes that phonology is the study of categorical organisation of speech sounds in languages; how speech sounds are organised and used to convey meaning. Learners should understand that proper articulation of the words enhances to a great extent the understanding of what is communicated.

In Nigeria, English serves as the official language. As a result, students are encouraged to speak and write in English. This being the case, they have to be acquainted with the rules and patterns of sounds in the language. As earlier mentioned, the basic sound systems of English are the consonant and vowels. The vowel sound is a speech sound made without any audible obstruction of the air flow from the lungs to the mouth. There are 12 pure vowels and 8 diphthong sounds in English. Within the twelve pure vowels, they are subdivided into long and short vowel sounds. This paper focuses on the long vowel sounds which are five in number. They include: /a:/, /i:/, /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/ and /u:/. As the name implies, their duration of pronunciation is longer than those of the short vowel counterpart.

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It has been observed that some speakers of English do not differentiate between the long and short sounds in their speeches. As a result, it sometimes leads to misunderstanding what is spoken. This study investigates the different contexts where these sounds are present and how the different environments affect their articulation and duration.

Basically, the problems a second language speakers faces are enormous and may sometimes arise from the pronunciation of words (Utin,2023). This occurs when the speaker equates or transfer what is obtainable in his/her language to the target language. While English indicates duration with the use of two dots in front of the sound /i:/, Annang for instance, indicates duration through a doubling of the sound that is affected as in 'aa'. Nevertheless, the study of phonetics and phonology exposes the speakers to the sound systems, which serve as a basis for good speaking. Beyond this, a conscious effort by the speakers makes it possible for them to be able to articulate the words correctly and this enhances good communication (Utin, 2016). It should be noted that there are similarities and differences in the sound patterns of different languages (Dohlus 2008). It is in this respect that this study investigates the articulation of long vowel sounds by the final year students of English.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is Generative Phonology which was propounded by Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle towards the end of 1950. It is a component of generative grammar which assigns the correct phonetic representations to utterances to reflect a native speaker's internalized grammar. In generative phonology, two levels of phonological representations are involved. The first level takes into consideration an underlying representation which forms the basic word before any phonological rule is applied to it. The second level pays attention to words and uses the phonological rules of that language to access the correctness of such words (Chomsky and Halle, 1968:p.1)

Research Methodology

The data for this study were collected through a reading test administered to fifty (50) final year students of the Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University who were selected using a purposive random sampling technique from a population of one hundred and twelve (112) students of the final year class. The reading test comprised words with the long sounds. The respondents read and the results obtained were as shown on the tables.

Presentation of Data

Table 1

Sound	Expected Performers Pronunciation(EPP)	Gloss(G)	Observed Performance(OP)	Frequency	Percentage
/a:/	/a/ as in /ha:d/	Hard	Realised as [had]	23	46
			[hat]	19	36
			[had]	9	18
	As in /fa:m/	Farm	[fam]	45	90
			[faam]	5	10
	As in ha:t/	Hart	[hat]	40	80
			[haat]	10	20
	As in /a:t/	Art	[at]	50	100
	As in /da:k/	Dark	[da:k]	10	20
			[dak]	40	80
	As in /sta:/	Star	[sta]	50	100
	As in /sta:t/	Start	[stat]	50	100

Discussion of Data

The problem arising from the realisation of long vowel sounds was that most of the respondent chose to shorten the sounds in the different context use for the study. In table 1, the data presented reveal that in respect to the /a:/ sound, in the word *hard*, 46% of the respondents articulated the word as [had], 36% articulated as [hat] while 18% articulated it as [haɖ]. The last option presents a case of devoicing of a voiced sound as indicated with a dot under the sound /d/. This entails that in the process of the articulation, 9 students representing 18% devoiced the sound. In the word *farm*, options isolated included [fam] and [faam] which recorded 90% and 10% respectively. The doubling of the sound in the second option results from the fact that length in the indigenous languages is expressed through a doubling of the sound as in 'aa' or 'ii' as the case may be *hart* and *art* were shortened to [hat] and [at] by 80% and 100% respondents respectively. 20% articulated *hart* as [haat] with a doubling of the sound to show the length. *dark* was articulated as [da:k] and [dak] with 20% and 80% respectively.

In addition, *star* and *start*, were realised as [sta] and [stat]. here, the difference lies in the arresting consonant (Udoka, Enang & Utin 2018) /t/ which shortens the /a:/ sound in *start* than with the word [star] as there is no consonant sound to arrest the long sound at the word final position. It should be noted that in the words *hart*, *dark* and *hard* some of the respondents articulated the consonants /d,t and k/ as non-released.

Table 2

Sound	Expected Performers Pronunciation(EPP)	Gloss(G)	Observed Performance(OP)	Frequency	Percentage
/i:/	As in /fi:/	Fee	Realised as [fi]	37	74
			[fi:]	13	26
	As in /fi:t/	Feet	[fit]	45	90
			[fi:t]	5	10
	As in /fi:d/	Feed	[fi:t]	43	86
			[fid]	7	14
	As in /zi:l/	Zeal	[sil]	8	16
			[zil]	32	64
			[zi:l]	10	20
	As in /indi:d/	Indeed	[indid]	35	70
[indi:d]			15	30	

Discussion of data

Data isolated from respondents with the sound /i:/ indicated the following. The word *fee* was articulated as [fi] and [fi:], with 74% and 26% respectively. This shows that majority of the respondents articulated the word with a short /i:/ sound instead of the long, Utin(2023). The second item, *feet* was realised as [fit] and [fi:t] by 90% and 10% respectively. It should be noted that the problem associated with shortening of the sound is giving a wrong impression to the listeners. For instance, the word *feet* articulated as [fit] gives the impression of *fit* and this could affect meaning interpretations.

The word *feed* was articulated as [fid] and [fi:d] with the frequency of 43 and 7 representing 86% and 14% respectively. Another item in this category was the word *zeal* and the various versions realised included: [sil], [zil] and [zi:l]. The first version [sil] indicates a case of devoicing of the voiced sound /z/, 8 representing 16% falls under this category. The second option was realised with a shortened sound. The frequency was 32 with a percentage of 64. In addition, 10 respondents representing 20% were able to properly articulate the word. This could be due to the fact that they are familiar with the sound and also make a conscious effort to correctly articulate the sound. The last item *indeed* was articulated as [indid] and [indi:d], with a frequency of 35 and 15 representing 70% and 30%. The result show that a greater percentage of the respondents shortened the sound from /i:/ to /i/ in the word. This results in the case of deletion and insertion.

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Table 3

Production of the Sound /ɜ:/

Sound	Expected performance pronunciation	Gloss	Observed performance	Frequency	Percentage
/ɜ:/	As in /fɜ:st/	First	Realized as [fest]	14	28
			[fes]	27	54
			[fɜ:st]	9	18
	As in /nɜ:s/	Nurse	[nes]	19	38
			[nos]	31	62
	As in /pɜ:s/	Purse	[pos]	13	26
			[pes]	21	42
			[pus]	16	32
	As in /fɜ:m/	Firm	[fem]	37	74
			[fɜ:m]	3	6
			[fam]	10	20

Discussion of Data

The results of the performances by the respondents in respect to the sound /ɜ:/ in the different contexts showed the following options. The first item realised in this category was the word *first* and the different performances observed were [fest], [fes] and [fɜ:st]. This represents a frequency of 14, 27 and 9 which translate it 28%, 54% and 18%. The first result [fest] indicates a case of assimilation where the sound /ɜ:/ becomes /e/ a more similar sound to the respondents. The second result [fes] shows a case of assimilation and deletion where the last consonant /t/ is either weakened or not pronounced (Utin 2023). The third option presents the correct articulation of the word.

In the second item in this category, the following performances were observed [nes] and [nos]. The results of the performances also indicate cases of deletion and insertion, where /ɜ:/ is deleted and /e/ and /o/ inserted respectively. The frequency of the performances was 19 and 31, representing 38% and 62% respectively. For the third item *purse*, the observed performances were [pos], [pes], [pus]. The frequencies were 13, 21 and 16 which represents 26%, 42% and 32% respectively. In this item, respondents applied the deletion and insertion rules, where /ɜ:/ is deleted and [o], [e], [u] inserted for easier articulation. It should be noted that this is done to allow the respondents easy articulation of the word as those are more familiar sounds to the respondents than /ɜ:/.

The last in this category was the word 'firm'. The observed performances by the respondents were [fem], [fɜ:m] and [fam] with frequencies of 37, 3 and 10, representing 74%, 6% and 20% respectively. The analysis shows that a greater percentage of the respondents articulated [fem], where they employed the deletion and insertion rules.

Table 4

Results of the production of the sound /u:/

Sound	Expected Performers Pronunciation (EPP)	Gloss (G)	Observed Performance (OP)	Frequency	Percentage
/u:/	As in /tru:əfəl/	Truthful	[trutful]	41	82
			[trutfool]	9	18
	As in /sku:l/	School	[skuul]	40	80
			[skul]	10	20

	As in /stu:l/	Stool	[stuul]	37	74
			[stul]	13	26
	As in /pu:l/	Pool	[puul]	35	70
			[pul]	15	30
	As in /ju:ə/	Youth	[jut]	25	50
			[dʒut]	10	20
			[jud]	15	30

Discussion of data

From table 4, results of the data indicated the following outcomes. The sound /u:/ in the item *truthful* was articulated as [tru:ful], [truɖfuul] sharing a frequency of 41 and 9 which represents 82% and 18% respectively. Here, the rules of deletion and insertion were applied by the respondents. The second item *school* was articulated as [skuul] and [skul]. The variations in the articulation by the respondent points to the fact that rules of deletion and insertion were used. Here, the respondents deleted the long /u:/ sound and inserted [uu] and [u] respectively. This resulted in the different variations of articulation of the item. The observed performances were 40 and 10, representing 80% and 20% respectively. The same rule was applied to the word *stool*, where the respondents deleted /u:/ and inserted [uu] and [u]. The frequencies recorded for this item were 37 and 13 representing 74% and 26% respectively. Also, the word *pool* was articulated using the same rules of deletion and insertion. From the data isolated, the results of the frequencies recorded were 35 and 15, representing 70% and 30% respectively. The last in this category was the word *youth*. Here, the results of the respondent performances were 25, 15 and 10 representing 50%, 30% and 20% respectively.

Table 5

Results of the production of the sound /ɔ:/

Sound	Expected Performers Pronunciation (EPP)	Gloss(G)	Observed Performance(OP)	Frequency	Percentage
/ɔ:/	/kɔ:d/	Cord	[kod]	43	86
			[kot]	7	14
	/kɔ:t/	Caught Court	[kot]	50	100
			[kot]	50	100
	/drɔ:/	Draw	[drɔ]	50	100
/spɔ:t/	Sport	[spot]	50	100	

From the table, it was realised that 43 respondents articulated the word *cord* as [kod] while 7 articulated it as [kot]. These frequencies represent 86% and 14% respectively. The other items *caught*, *court*, *draw*, and *sport* were articulated as [kot], [kot], [drɔ] and [spot] respectively. Each item had 50 as the frequency which represents 100%.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Some of the contexts in which these sounds occur have been isolated and discussed. Findings reveal that some speakers do not pay attention to the distinction existing between the long and the short vowels. As a result, a conscious effort is needed on the part of the learner to know the sounds on individual basis and be able to articulate them in any context that they are found. Constant practice is also needed on the part of the learners to be able to pronounce words with these sounds effectively without hindering communication (Utin 2016). The study also revealed that the sound /ɔ:/ was the easiest the respondents could articulated while the sound /ɜ:/ was the most problematic for the respondents. The analysis was done using insights from Chomsky' and Halle's Generative Phonology which provides the rules learners use to navigate their ways through in a new language. The paper concludes that acquiring sounds in a second language can be a lot challenging for the

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second language learners. However, this paper suggests that making a conscious effort and getting committed to learning the sounds can go a long way to gaining proficiency in the language.

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Appendix

Test 1

- 1) Mr Dominic works hard on his farm near the pool.
- 2) He sits on the stool in the school.
- 3) We will start a new business soon.
- 4) Indeed, we need to encourage him to shine like a star.
- 5) He is a youth who is interested in sports.
- 6) He caught the ball while he was playing in the tennis court.
- 7) Barr. Uwakmfon is in court today.
- 8) We need to draw her attention to that institution where art is put first.
- 9) Prepare the food and feed the baby.
- 10) Tie the bag with the cord.
- 11) I love the zeal of the nurse, she's so hardworking.
- 12) It's a new firm in town.