

English Pronunciation Errors: A Case Study of Amhara and Oromia Regions of Ethiopia

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Abstract:

The main goal of this study is oral fluency, that is, the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and without too much hesitation without which communication breaks down. In pursuit of this intelligibility between speaker and hearer, the researchers observed through formal and informal settings to find out the deficiencies in the speeches of speakers from the two regions under study that calls for immediate attention. Efforts were made to highlight the pronunciation errors, give possible reasons why they may be occurring and provided plausible solutions.

Introduction

The English Language is used as a foreign language in Ethiopia. Even at that, the teaching of English in schools does not start until grade seven of the education. The language of instruction and communication at all levels is the respective regional language –Amharic in Amhara region and Afan Oromo in Oromia region. Government businesses are mostly conducted in the regional languages. It is observed that circulars are usually written in the native language in the universities. Though stated that the language of instruction from higher grade to the university level is English, most indigenous lecturers still deliver their lectures in their native language. This is because some are not proficient in the English Language having gone through the same system, and the students who all through their lives have been using their native languages are unable to understand lectures delivered in English. This is

the shock of most expatriates in Ethiopia who run into the problem of being understood by these students.

Some of the students and teachers who can speak English render some pronunciations inaccurately. This could be attributed to the earlier teachers of English in Ethiopia and the influence of the sound system of the native language which they use for everything. This is possible because a learner may encounter sounds in English that are not part of the sound inventory of the learner's native language. Thirdly, difficulties may also arise because the rules for combining sounds into words are different in the learners' native language. As a result of these difficulties, the native language affects not just the ability of the learners to produce English sounds, but also their ability to hear the sounds.

These assumptions were confirmed by Avery and Ehrlich (1997) when they identified the factors that contribute to the inability of the second language learners (also foreign language learners) to acquire the sound system of a second language. The factors according to them include biological, socio-cultural, personality and linguistic factors.

Biological Factors:

Avery and Ehrlich (1997) used the "critical period hypothesis" to explain this factor. This hypothesis holds that languages are learned differently by children and adults. While child second language learner almost always attains native-like pronunciation, the adult learners almost always have foreign accent. Most speakers of English in Amhara and Oromia regions have this foreign accent because English is not learnt early enough in their lives.

Socio-Cultural Factors:

Socio-cultural factors play an important role in Ethiopia. The more a learner identifies and affiliates with his language and culture, the more he loses grip of the sound system of

English. Conversely, early training in the target language and its pronunciations brings about improvement in the learners.

Personality Factor:

The personality of the learners should not be left out. Extroverts who are out-going with the wish to socialize learn to speak better than introverts who are always shy to interact with others.

Historical Factor:

Historically, the problem of acquisition and usage of the English language in Ethiopia can be traced partly to the take-over of education by the natives after the fall of the Imperial regime. After the liberation of the country in 1942, the British as partners in the liberation struggle asserted their influence on the organization of educational system in the country (Seyoun, 1996). As would be expected, the language of instruction as the English language. But with the death of Imperial regime and the taken-over of the Dergue regime in 1974, the foreign teachers (Americans, Britons, and the Indians) left. This led to a dire shortage of qualified teachers both at the primary and secondary school levels. Before the exist of the foreign teachers, the observation was that the proficiency of the most native teachers and students in English was anything but poor (Seyoun, 1996). In fact, the language was seen as a medium of obstruction rather than of instruction. Therefore, the exist of the foreign teachers, many untrained teachers were recruited to teach in the schools with their little knowledge of English. This led to the agitation for teaching in Amharic language since the teachers were not proficient in the English language.

Again, the disappearance of the few educated Ethiopians either to war or dispersion by 1974 dealt a serious blow to the use of English as a medium of instruction. Many of these educated few found themselves in Europe and America and after their studies decided not to come home; thus educating was left largely in the hands of untrained teachers.

Coupled with this was the policy of secrecy on educational matters of the regime at that time and the strengthening of Amharic as the medium of instruction up till recently when English language was introduced as a medium of instruction at the higher level of education in Ethiopia. It is not uncommon to see the native English language teachers using Amharic to teach the English language and other subjects like Mathematics and Physics during classes.

The idea of teaching students to write, and not to speak, is another very vital set back to the English Language acquisition in Ethiopia.

Linguistic Factors:

The learners' native language to a large extent determines the nature of his foreign accent. The sound patterns of the native languages may be transferred into the second language. The pronunciation errors that second/foreign learners made were not just random attempt to produce some familiar sounds but they rather reflect the sound inventory, rules of combination, stress and intonation patterns of the native language.

It is the combination of these factors that play a role in the errors noticed in English pronunciations in the regions studied.

Statement of Problem:

It has been noticed that both students and the elite members of Amhara and Oromia regions of Ethiopia make the following production errors in the use of the English Language:

- Inserting the sound /I/ before the plural morpheme /s/
- Generalizing all the past tense morphemes to /ed/
- Insistence on the pronunciation of the liquid sound /r/ anywhere it occurs in a word.

- Pronunciation of the voiced velar plosive /g/ in word final position even when the realization should be the velar nasal /ŋ/
- The pronunciation of the dental sounds /θ, ð/ as voiced alveolar fricative /z/
- Inability to note the silent letters in English

Methodology:

The researchers made use of both formal and informal methods in collecting the data for this study. Formally, two universities were used – Haramaya University in Oromia region and Bahir Dar university in Amhara region. In the course of classroom teaching, students were given passages to read. The errors perceived by the researchers were documented in a written form. More were also recorded while the students interacted with the researchers-teachers. The researchers recorded the re-occurrence of most errors observed in the classroom.

There were also informal documentations of errors. It is informal because the native speakers never knew they were being observed. This has to do with every day conversations and interaction with colleagues and members of the public. Two important workshops/seminars were attended by the researchers at both universities under study. They are workshop on the review of post graduate curriculum for College of Agriculture at Haramaya University and 25th Annual Seminar of the faculty of Education in Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. Each lasted for two days. Papers were presented by highly educated members of the university communities.

Discussions:

This section of the study looked into the pronunciation errors as well as stated what they ought to be. Some of these errors noticed were as follows:

1. Inserting the sound /I/ before the regular plural morpheme /s/

Most words that end in /s/ were not properly pronounced. The sound /I/ was always imposed after that consonant as if the intention is to maintain a CVC structure. We heard erroneous pronunciations like:

Words	Erroneous Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation
Student	*/stju:dentɪs/	/stju:dnts/
Aspects	*/æspektɪs/	/æspekts/
Fields	*/fi:ldɪs/	/fi:lds/
Involves	*/ɪnvɒlves/	/ɪnvɒlves/
Pests	*/pestɪs/	/pests/
Reports	*/rɪpɔ:tɪs/	/rɪpɔ:ts/
Agents	*/eɪdʒəntɪs/	/eɪdʒənts/
Supermarket	*/su:pərmɑ:kɪtɪs/	/su:pərmɑ:kets/
Slides	*/slaɪdɪs/	/slaɪds/
Contents	*/kɒntentɪs/	/kɒntents/
Length	*/lɛŋtɪs/	/lɛŋθs/
Pupils	*/pju:pɪlɪs/	/pju:pɪls/
Respondents	*/respɒndəntɪs/	/respɒndənts/
Comments	*/kɒmentɪs/	/kɒments/
Instruments	*/ɪnstɹəmɛntɪs/	/ɪnstɹəmɛnts/
Scientists	*/saɪəntɪstɪs/	/saɪəntɪsts/
Points	*/pɔɪntɪs/	/pɔɪnts/
Chemists	*/kemɪstɪs/	/kemɪsts/

The regular English plural is formed by the addition of –s/es to the base word. They are realized in three different forms governed by phonological conditions:

- i. It is realized as /s/ after voiceless sounds except the hissing sounds -s, ʃ, tʃ / as in:

Cats /kæts/	books /bʊks/	caps /kæps/
Sits /sɪts/	goats /gəʊts/	sacks /sæks/
Myths /mɪθs/	stops /stɒps/	thinks /θɪŋk/

ii. /z/ occurs after voiced sounds, that is, all vowels and voiced consonants except hissing sounds as in :

Dogs /dɒgz/	bags /bægz/	leaves /li:vz/
Girls /gɜ:lz/	boys /bɔɪz/	sings /sɪŋz/
Mills /mɪlz/	cans /kænz/	pegs /pegz/

iii. /ɪz/ occurs after the hissing sounds (sibilants) /s, z, ʒ, dʒ, tʃ/ as in:

Houses /haʊzɪz/	beaches /bi:tʃɪz/	badges /bædʒɪz/
Churches /tʃɜ:tʃɪz/	dishes /dɪʃɪz/	ridges /rɪdʒɪz/
Messages /mesɪdʒɪz/	buses /bʌsɪz/	benches /bentʃɪz/

2. The next area of error was the generalization of the entire regular past tense morpheme to /ed/. This can be exemplified in the pronunciation of the following words which were observed and recorded.

Words	Erroneous Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation
Asked	*/a:sked/	/a:skt/
Advanced	*/ədva:nɪsed/	/ədva:nst/
Involved	*/ɪnvɒlved/	/ɪnɒlvd/
Convinced	*/kənvɪnsed/	/kənvɪnst/
Worked	*/wɜ:ked/	/wɜ:kt/
Fixed	*/fɪksed/	/fɪkst/
Changed	*/tʃeɪndʒed/	/tʃeɪndʒd/
Concerned	*/kənsɜ:ned/	/kənsɜ:nd/
Advised	*/ədvaɪsed/	/ədvaɪzt/

Depressed	*/dɪpresed/	/dɪprest/
Designed	*/dɪzaɪned/	/dɪzaɪnd/
Described	*/dɪskraɪbed/	/dɪskraɪbd/
Assumed	*/əsju:med/	/əsju:md/
Launched	*/lɔ:ntʃed/	/lɔ:ntʃt/
Converged	*/kənvɜ:dʒed/	/kənvɜ:dʒd/
Contrived	*/kəntraɪved/	/kəntraɪvd/
Forced	*/fɔ:ksed/	/fɔ:st/
Collapsed	*/kəlæpsed/	/kəlæpst/
Repulsed	*/rɪpʌlsed/	/rɪpʌlst/
Arranged	*/əreɪndʒed/	/əreɪndʒd/
Performed	*/pɜ:fɔ:med/	/pɜ:fɔ:md/

There is this insistence on pronouncing the –ed wherever it occurs. Just like the plural morpheme, we have three different realizations of the regular past tense morpheme. The sound /ed/ is not one of them. They are realized as /d, t, ɪd/ under the following phonological conditions:

i. /t/ or /d/ at the end of a word plus –ed is realized as /ɪd/

started	/sta:tɪd/	added	/ædɪd/	decided	/desaɪdɪd/
landed	/lændɪd/	painted	/peɪntɪd/	provided	/prəvaɪdɪd/
waited	/weɪtɪd/	planted	/plæntɪd/	bolted	/bɔʊltɪd/

ii. The voiceless sounds /p, k, f, s, ʃ, tʃ/ plus –ed is realized as /t/:

dreamt	/dremt/	knocked	/nɒkt/	clapped	/klæpt/
roped	/rəʊpt/	walked	/wɔ:kt/	coughed	/kɒft/
talked	/tɔ:kt/	smashed	/smæʃt/	fixed	/fɪkst/
missed	/mɪst/	asked	/æskt/	faced	/feɪst/

iii. All other voiced sounds except /d/ plus –ed is realized as /d/

Stoned	/stəʊnd/	solved	/sʌlvd/	hurried	/hʌrɪd/
Played	/pleɪd/	cuddled	/kʌdlɪd/	praised	/preɪzd/
Sued	/sju:d/	begged	/begd/	bribed	/braɪbd/
Bowed	/baʊd/	tagged	/tægd/	lived	/lɪvd/

3. Another observable area of erroneous pronunciation was the insistence on the pronunciation of the liquid /r/ no matter where it occurs. Some of the words erroneously pronounced were:

Words	Erroneous Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation
Car	*/kɑ:r/	/kɑ: (r)/
Desert	*/dezərt/	/dezət/ (n), /dɪzɜ:t/ (v)
Iron	*/aɪrən/	/aɪən/
Carp	*/kɑ:rp/	/kɑ:p/
Card	*/kɑ:rd/	/kɑ:d/
Teacher	*/tɪ:tʃər/	/tɪ:tʃə(r) /
Girls	*/gɜ:rlɪs/	/gɜ:ls/
Third	*/θɜ:rd/	/θɜ:d/
Thirst	*/θɜ:rst/	/θɜ:st/
First	*/fɜ:rst/	/fɜ:st/
Counter	*/kauntər/	/kauntə(r)/
Court	*/kɔ:rt/	/kɔ:t/
Sort	*/sɔ:rt/	/sɔ:t/
Sugar	*/sʊgər/	/sʊgə(r)/
Sister	*/sɪstər/	/sɪstə(r)/
Doctor	*/dɒktər/	/dɒktə(r)/
Better	*/betər/	/betə(r)/
Mother	*/mʌðər/	/mʌðə(r)/
Transport	*/trænsɜ:rt/	/trænsɜ:t/

Transfer	*/trænsfər/	/trænsfə(r)/
Escort	*/iskɔ:rt/	/iskɔ:t/
Export	*/ɪkspɔ:rt/	/ɪkspɔ:t/
Heart	*/ha:rt/	/ha:t/

The liquid sound /r/ is easily pronounced when it occurs immediately before vowels as in rate, rat, race, etc. When words are said in isolation, /r/ occurs only in initial and medial positions as in:

Initial Position	Medial Position
Rat	pray, around
Race	mirror, barrow
Run	sorry, bright
Rock	fury, tray
Rag	spirit, pirate
Rope	very, during
Read	from, carry

This is the reason why it is silent in word final positions as in car /ka:/. /r/ is silent before consonants and final positions unless the word is followed by another word beginning with a vowel. For example:

In Isolation:

- Art /a:t/
- Curl /kɜ:l/
- Heart /ha:t/
- Car /ka:t/
- My father /maɪ fa:ðə/
- There with /ðeə wɪð/

When followed by other word beginning with a vowel, it is pronounced out as in:

A car arrived /ə kɑ:r əraɪvd/

Come here at once /kʌm hɪər ət wʌns/

There upon /ðeər əpʌn/

There under /ðeər ʌndə(r)/

4. The next problematic area was the pronunciation of the voiced velar plosive /g/ in word final position even when the realisation should be the velar nasal /ŋ/. Examples were:

Words	Erroneous Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation
Gang	*/gæng/	/gæŋ/
Hang	*/hæng/	/hæŋ/
Robbing	*/rɒbɪng/	/rɒbɪŋ/
Thing	*/θɪng/	/θɪŋ/
Coming	*/kʌmɪng/	/kʌmɪŋ/
Morning	*/mɔ:nɪng/	/mɔ:nɪŋ/
Sing	*/sɪng/	/sɪŋ/
Regarding	*/rɪgɑ:dɪng/	/rɪgɑ:dɪŋ/
Running	*/rʌnɪng/	/rʌnɪŋ/
Going	*/gəʊɪng/	/gəʊɪŋ/
Refreshing	*/rɪfreʃɪng/	/rɪfreʃɪŋ/
Sang	*/sæng/	/sæŋ/
Sung	*/sʌng/	/sʌŋ/
Whoppin	*/wɒpɪng/	/wɒpɪŋ/

A lot of words ending in ng are generally realized as /ŋ/. The sound /g/ is pronounced in word initial, medial and final positions as in gun, glass, eager, hunger, dug, mug and so on. Apart from being realized as /ŋ/ in ng spellings, it is silent when followed by m or n in the same syllable as in gnat, gnaw, phlegm, sign, feign, etc.

5. The pronunciation of inter-dental sounds / θ, ð/ as voiced alveolar fricative /z/:

The sounds / θ/ and /ð/ are referred to as inter-dental sounds because the tongue is placed between the teeth in its production. The two th sounds are notoriously difficult for foreign/second language learners because it does not exist in a lot of indigenous languages. Ethiopians realize th as /z/. You hear such erroneous constructions as:

Word	Erroneous	Right
Then	*/zen/	/ðen/
That	*/zæt	/ðæt/
The	*/zə/	/ðə/ or /ðI/
The other	*/zI ɔ:zə/	/ðI ʌ ðə(r) /
Whether	*/wezər/	/weðə(r) /
This	*/zɪs/	/ðɪs/
Those	*/zəʊz/	/ðəʊz/
Father	*/fa:zər/	/fa: ðə(r) /
Mother	*/mʌzər/	/mʌ ðə(r) /
Thought	*/zɔ:t/	/θɔ:t/

These sounds should be differentiated for the foreign language learners. While / θ/ and / ð/ are inter-dental fricatives – the first voiceless and the latter voiced, the sound/z/ is a voiced alveolar fricative. The alveolar sounds are produced with the tip of the tongue touching the alveolar ridge. /ð/ is found in words like *the, this, that, these, those, then, than, there, though, them, mother, father, brother, etc.* / θ/ is found in *think, thank, thought, mouth, cloth, path, etc.*

6. Finally is the speakers' inability to note the existence of a lot of silent letters in English. As for them, every letter in a word must be pronounced. Below is a collection of some

English letters and how they are to be pronounced as compiled by Umera-Okeke (Unpublished).

Silent B

When the letter b comes after m, or when it comes before t in words, the b is silent in such words:

limb /lɪm/	thumb /θʌm/	comb /kəʊm/
numb /nʌm/	womb /wu:m/	debt /det/
subtle /sʌtl/	debtor /detə/	doubtful /daʊtfəl/
doubt /daʊt/	Plumb /plʌm/	climb /klaɪm/
dumb /dʌm/	crumb /krʌm/	tomb /tu:m/
Lamb /læm/	succumb/səkʌm/	bomb /bɒm/

Silent C

Muscle /mʌsl/	Scene /si:n/	abscond / əbskɒnd/
Science /saɪəns/	Abscess /æbses/	indict/ɪndaɪt/
Scepter /septə/	victuals /vɪtlz/	

Silent D

width /wɪθ/	handsome /hænsəm/
handkerchief /hænkətʃɪf/	Wednesday/wenzdeɪ/
sandpaper/sænpəɪpə/	

Silent G

gnash /næʃ/	gnaw /nɔ:/	gnat /næt/
gnome/nəʊm/	sign /saɪn/	hang /hæŋ/
tongue /tʌŋ/	reign /reɪn/	thing /θɪŋ/
foreign/fɔrən/	resign /rɪzaɪn/	design /dɪzaɪn/
young /yʌŋ/	strong /strɒŋ/	sing /sɪŋ/
fling /flɪŋ/	song /sɒŋ/	sovereign /sɔvrɪn/
arraign / əreɪn/	monsignor/mɒnsɪ:njə/	
campaign /kæmpeɪn/		

Silent H

hour/auə/	honest / ɒnɪst/	honour / ɒnə/
heir/eə/	exhaust /ɪgzɔ:st/	exhibit

vehicle /vɪ:kəl/ shepherd /ʃepə:d/ ghost /gəʊst/
rhyme /raɪm/ which /wɪtʃ/
rheumatism /ru:mətɪzəm/

Silent K

Know /nəʊ/ knit /nɪt/ knock /nɒk/
Knight /naɪt/ knee/nɪ:/ knife/naɪf/
Kneel /ni:l/ knew /nju:/ knob/nɒb/
knot /nɒt/ knoll /nəʊl/ knead /ni:d/
Knickers /nɪkəz/ knave /neɪv/ knuckle /nʌkl/
knowledge/nɒlɪdʒ/ Knapsack /næpsæk/

Silent L

Could /kʊd/ or /kəd/ would /wʊd/ or /wəd/
Should /ʃʊd/ or /ʃəd/ calf /kɑ:f/ chalk /tʃɔ:k/
Palm /pɑ:m/ walk/wɔ:k/ yolk /jɒk/
half /hɑ:f/ behalf /bɪhɑ:f/
psalm/sɑ:m/
salmon /sæmən/ halves /hævs/

Silent M

Mnemonics /nəməʊnɪks/

Silent N

hymn /hɪm/ solemn /sɒləm/ condemn /kəndem/
column /kɒləm/ autumn /ɔ:t əm/ damn /dæm/

Silent P

Psalm /sa:m/ psychology /saɪkɒlədʒɪ/ psychic /saɪkɪk/
Pseudo /sju:dəʊ/ corps /kɔ:/ empty /emptɪ/
Cupboard /kəbɔ:d/ Sampson /sæmsn/ receipt /rɪsɪ:t/
Coup /ku:/ pseudonym /sju:dənɪm/
psychiatry /saɪkaɪətri/
pneumonia /nju:məʊniə/

Silent S

Island/aɪlənd/ isle /aɪl/

Puisne /pju:ni/ viscount /vaɪkaunt/

Silent T

Listen /lɪsn/ often /ɒfn/ or /ɒftən/ castle /kɑ:sl/
butcher, wrestle /resl/ deport /deɪpɔ:/
rapport/ræpɔ: / Wretch /retʃ/ ballet /bæleɪ/
whistle /wɪsl/ bustle /bʌsl/ Christmas /krɪsməs/

Silent U

Guess /ges/ quest /kwest/ guard /gɑ:d/
Guide /gaɪd/ rouge /rəʊʒ/ colleague /kɒli:g/
Guitar /gɪtɑ:/ guinea /gɪnɪ/ vague /veɪg/
guild /gɪld/ guilt /gɪlt/ plague /pleɪg/

Silent W

wretched /retʃɪd/ wrestling /reslɪŋ/ wrinkle /rɪŋkl/
wrong /rɒŋ/ who /hu:/ whore /hɔ:/
wrath /rɒθ/ wrist/rɪst/ wrap /ræp/
sword /sɔ:d/ wrapper /ræpə/ whom /hu:m/
answer/a:nsə/ playwright /pleɪraɪt/ write/raɪt/
dawn /dɔ:n/ wrought /rɔ:t/ wrench/rentʃ/
wiggle /rɪgl/ wreck /rek/ wreath/rɪ:θ/

Silent GH

blight/blɑɪt/ bright /braɪt/ bought /bɔ:t/
caught /kɔ:t/ delight /dɪlaɪt/ might /maɪt/
straight /streɪt/ sigh /saɪ/ neighbour /neɪbə/
fight /faɪt/ light /laɪt/ right /raɪt/
height /haɪt/ naught /nɔ:t/ taught /tɔ:t/
thigh /θaɪ/ weight /weɪt/ plough /plau/

Silent UE

Catalogue /kætəlɒg/ dialogue /daɪəlɒg/
Epilogue /epɪlɒg/ prologue /prɒlɒg/

Suggestions/Recommendation

Since every nation is striving for recognition in the globalization project, no one can afford to be left behind, the

curriculum planners need not live in the delusion of native or local technology as some people are campaigning. They should inculcate the teaching of English language into the curriculum from the kindergarten level in order to create relevance and competitive edge for the average Ethiopian in the world system

As language teachers, we should Endeavour to teach the language and not about the language. A language is what the native speakers say not what some people think they ought to say. It is therefore necessary to teach pronunciation and pronunciation problems to students from the early stage of education.

Let the students know aspects of their pronunciation that result in other people being unable to understand them. They should also be given opportunity to practice aspects of the English sound system which are crucial for their own improvement. This could be done through minimal pairs, dialogues and other conversation practices.

Finally, the attempt is not to completely eradicate a foreign accent but the goal of the teacher is to bring an improvement in their pronunciation especially as regards critical error responsible for incomprehensibility.

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