An analysis of some common pronunciation errors made by Congolese French Speakers learning English at the University of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

This study investigates common pronunciation errors made in English by Congolese French speakers learning English with special reference to students from the English Department of the University of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Based on data collected through everyday observation of the students speech and through a pronunciation test, it is aimed at identifying the most recurrent segmental errors in order to trace back their major sources and suggest some remedial strategies. A careful scrutiny has disclosed that most of the errors made by these students find their sources mostly in interlingual interference, intralingual interference as well as in the context of learning with the teacher as the model and the learners with their learning strategies. Remedial strategies include discrimination drills, production exercises through choral and individual repetitions, and tongue twisters among others. Watching videos with authentic pronunciation practice by native speakers on You Tube Channel followed by choral and individual practice by learners is also highly recommended.

Key words: analysis, pronunciation errors, Congolese French speakers , learners of English

1.Introduction

It is widely acknowledged in the field of the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language that one area that causes much trouble to most learners is undoubtedly pronunciation. English pronunciation is, indeed, considered as a stumbling   block for many learners who think that it is difficult and inconsistent. Although it is often pushed   to the bottom of the list behind other aspects of language like grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading and writing, it is axiomatic that pronunciation matters owing to the fact that it plays a crucial role for intelligibility,

efficiency, and clarity in communication. Improper pronunciation can, indeed, lead to misunderstanding, ineffective communication and negative impression.

As Abu Bakar and Ridhuan (2015) argue, '' pronunciation has a key role in successful communication both productively and receptively''. Similarly, Morley (1991) asserts that ''intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence''.

Stervick, quoted by Katsuva (1987: 232), states that ''pronunciation is the primary medium through which we bring our use of language to the attention of other people''. As a matter of fact, when we talk to people, pronunciation is the first thing they notice during a conversation.

 Good pronunciation makes a good impression. In fact, how good someone's pronunciation is in general can be judged very quickly and an opinion is automatically formed on his/her educational and social background by people who hear him/her. Good pronunciation is also thought to be a sign of good education and culture in any language community and is held in high esteem. Moreover, it adds to the charisma of an individual's personality.

Yet, this does not mean that learners of English as a second or foreign language have to sound like native speakers. It rather means that they have to speak with an intelligible pronunciation, that is, in a way that most listeners, both native and non-native speakers, can understand without too much effort or confusion.

With regard to English used as a global language, if pronunciation is allowed to go astray from native norms too noticeably, then its utility as an international means of communication is likely to be threatened owing to the fact that its intelligibility will fall to a low level within quite restricted areas of the world.

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that when people embark on the process of learning a second or foreign language, their neurophysiological system has already been imprinted with ingrained phonetic habits of their first language. More specifically, their brains have already developed a phonological filter of their native language so that all the sounds of a new language are to be '' filtered out'' through this filter. As a consequence, the sounds of the first language will be in conflict with those of the new language(s).

Language learning, whether it is first, second or foreign language, like any other human learning, is a creative process of forming a system that inevitably involves the making of errors and mistakes. It is crucial to distinguish unfortunate mistakes from genuine errors.

A mistake, as opposed to an error, is an incorrect form produced by the learner owing to inattention, temporary lapses of memory, confusion, slips of the tongue or pen, hesitations, repeats, false starts and random ungrammaticalities. It is not caused by lack of knowledge, nor does it result from a deficiency in competence from some sort of breakdown or imperfection in the process of producing speech. A mistake is sometimes referred to as a ''performance error''.

An error, as opposed to a mistake, is an imperfect production caused by genuine lack of knowledge (competence) about the language. Chomsky pointed out that native speakers make many errors when performing, even though a native speaker has, by definition, a perfect command of his language, and cannot, therefore, make errors. This native speaker's perfect knowledge of his language is what Chomsky called competence, while performance is an imperfect realization of competence.

With regard to the significance of errors, Corder (1967: 167) pointed out that '' A learner's errors…are significant in (that) they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of language''.

Therefore, a learner's errors should not be viewed as a sign of failure, but rather as a proof that he is developing his own system of rules. As Brown (1980:163) put it, '' by a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing , the learner slowly and tediously succeeds in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers of the language''. Errors are inherent to human nature (to err is human) and are not, therefore, mortal sins.

It is against this background on pronunciation and errors that a close observation of most Congolese learners of English as a foreign language, and more particularly students from the English department of the University of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo (henceforth DRC), discloses that they reach the university level with a poor command of pronunciation so that their speech exhibits some common errors likely to hamper intelligibility and cause breaks in communication with other English speakers.

The present study is therefore aimed at identifying some of the most commonly recurrent pronunciation errors made by Congolese learners of English at the segmental level and carrying out an analysis of these errors in order to trace back their potential sources and suggest remedial strategies to fix them.

2. Methodology

The participants in the study were twenty five students enrolled at the beginning of the academic year 2020-2021 in the first year undergraduate in the Department of English at the Faculty

of Arts and Human Sciences of the University of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition to observing students while interacting in English, by way of a routine introduction to the course of English Phonetics and Phonology, the students were asked to read aloud a list of words and sentences. Samples of their pronunciation were recorded and analyzed. The data collected from the pronunciation test and observation were aimed at identifying pronunciation errors and inspiring insights as to their prior command in English pronunciation for the purpose of corrective drills. It is worth mentioning that when these students embark on the learning of English, their brains have already been imprinted with the sounds of previously acquired languages ,namely French as the official language , national languages, namely , Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili, and Lingala , to which can be added their ethnic languages. The analysis and interpretation of errors will be backed by error analysis and contrastive study.

3. Findings and Discussion

A close scrutiny of the errors made by these learners has revealed the following main deviant features in their speech:

A. At the level of vowel segments

1. Neutralization of the opposition between the vowel segments /i: / and /ɪ/. Most of these Congolese learners fail to distinguish between the two segments owing to the fact that in the languages acquired previously, namely French and other Congolese languages, there is only one phoneme /i/. This error in pronunciation finds its source in interlingual transfer from the phonological systems of previously acquired languages. Remedial strategies consist in involving learners in the activity of listening to discrimination drills and repeating them in chorus first and then individually. For example: leave –live, sheep-ship, bead-bid, cheap-chip, sheep-ship, peach-pitch, and feel-fill.

Learners can also be asked to give the words containing the opposite sounds, for example, leave-(live) , ship-(sheep) , bead- (bid), chip-(cheap), sleep-(slip) ,pit- (peat), feel- (fill)

Learners can also be taught the following tongue twisters containing respectively the sounds /i:/ and /i/ -These are the three evil thieves the chief of police is seeking. We visited this pretty hill village on Whit Monday. (taken from Adamczewski,H & Keen,D.1973),

Watching videos with authentic pronunciation exercises by native speakers and repetition in chorus and individually is also recommended.

2.Monophthongization of the English diphthong /ei/ that is realized as [e]. Congolese learners generally fail to realize this diphthong due to the fact that it does not exist in the languages acquired previously. This error in pronunciation finds its source in interlingual transfer from these languages acquired previously.

Remedial strategies for correction of this error include involving learners in listening to and repeating discrimination drills, in chorus first and then individually. For example: pen-pane, sell-sail, tell-tale, edge-age, men-mane, debt-date, met-mate, wet-wait, pepper-paper, wedges-wages.

 In addition, learners can be asked to find the words containing the opposite sounds, for example, Find the word containing the opposite sound to: sell-(sail), pane-(pen), debt-(date), tale-(tell), pepper-(paper), age-(edge), wet-(wait), mate-(met).

Learners can also be taught to practise the following tongue twisters containing respectively the sounds /ei/ and /e/: -The train came into Newhaven station eight minutes late.

-Ten friendly French lieutenants went to Leicester.

  3. Spelling pronunciation: the pronunciation of some words is influenced by their spelling. Hence, Congolese learners often rely on the spelling to pronounce the word busy as ['byzi] instead of ['bɪzɪ], and the word business as ['byziness] or ['bju:zness] instead of ['bɪznis]. Such errors in pronunciation find their source in both interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. In realizing the first syllable bu as [by], learners intuitively transfer in English the pronunciation from French, while in realizing this first syllable bu as [bju:], the second syllable sy (in busy) or si (in business) as [zɪ] and the third ness as [nes], their pronunciation is influenced by the spelling of the English alphabet.   Likewise, for the word minute, referring to time, their first tendency is to pronounce it as [mi'nyt] like in French, or ['mɪnju:t], instead of ['mɪnɪt]. The first pronunciation results from interlingual transfer from French, while the second is an intralingual transfer from the English spelling.

        In a similar way, the word building is often pronounced as ['byldɪng], ['bwɪldɪng], [bju:ldɪŋ], or [bu:ldɪŋ] instead of ['bɪldɪŋ]. The two first pronunciations result from an interlingual transfer from French, while the third and fourth can be traced back   to intralingual transfer from the English spelling that interferes in the pronunciation.

4.Substitution of vowels from previously acquired languages for English vowels

a. /a/ or /e/ are substituted for /ə/ in words like ago, again, about, teacher, doctor, sister, better, sugar, water, etc. so that these words are respectively realized as [a'gou] or [e'gou], [a'gen] or [e'gen], [a'baut] or [e'baut], ['ti:tʃa] or ['ti:tʃe], ['dɔkta] or['dɔkte], ['sɪsta] or ['sɪste]; ['beta] or ['bete];

['ʃuga]or ['ʃuge]; ['wɔta] or ['wɔte] instead of [ə'gəu], [ə'gein] ,[ə'baut], ['ti:tʃə];['dɔktə];

['sɪstə];['betə]; ['ʃugə] and ['wɔtə].

Although the phoneme /ə/ does exist in French, it is not found in Congolese languages. The English vowel phoneme /ə/, the schwa, is by far the one that has the highest frequency of occurrence, especially in unaccented syllables. The mouth position is neutral, the lips are relaxed , the jaw is roughly half way open, and the tongue is flat. The sound is always weak. Since it is more central and retracted than the French /ə/ and its realization requires too much effort, Congolese learners find it difficult to realize and energy-consuming. They therefore replace it by the above mentioned phonemes that are found in the languages they already speak. Such errors in pronunciation find their source in interlingual transfer from previously acquired languages. Remedial strategies consist in listening to and repeating discrimination drills in which the schwa can be found in initial, medial or final positions. For example:

/ə/ in initial position: about-away-ago-again –above-around-alone ;   /ə/in medial position: Oxford-England-Poland Robert-William-Thomas ;   /ə/ in final position: China-Canada-Africa-America-Asia-doctor-teacher-driver-worker-professor-conductor.

b. /a/ or /e/ are substituted for /æ/ in words like man, bad, cat, black, fat, hat, cab, bag, etc. the vowel /æ/ does not exist neither in French nor in Congolese languages. It follows that Congolese learners strive to approximate this sound to the sounds of the languages they have acquired previously. They attempt to realize it as the French sounds/a/, which is absent in English, or /e/ that is found in both languages and in Congolese languages. The English sound /æ/ is the most open of the English front vowels. The opening movement goes from /i:/ to /æ/ as follows: /i:/→/ɪ/→/e/→/æ/. Yet, it is less open than the French sound /a/ like in the French word patte. The occurrence of this error in pronunciation is accountable to interlingual transfer from previously acquired languages, namely French and Congolese languages. Such an error may also be induced by the context of learning, especially the teachers, in case the learners have acquired the error from their teachers at the level of secondary school. This fact is corroborated by Kanyandu Betu (2020:67) who, after investigating the fossilization of the /æ/ sound among advanced students at the English department of the Pedagogic University of Kananga, asserted that some pronunciation errors are inherited from teachers due to their incompetence.

Remedial strategies to fix such an error consist in involving learners in listening to discrimination drills from the teacher and audio material and in choral and individual repetition. For example, listen and repeat: bad-bed, pan –pen, man-men, band-bend, mass-mess, sat-set, latter-letter, had-head, jam-gem.

Learners can also be required to give which sound, /æ/ or /e/, they hear in the following words: bend-back-set-band-guess-peck-gas-pack-man-met-pan-mat-pen.

The teacher can also involve the learners in practising tongue twisters like:

That bad black cat catches sad fat rats. Can you can a can as a canner can can a can?

Fred's French is bad.

c. /ai/ is often substituted for /ɪ/ in words like promise, examine, determine. This pronunciation error finds its source in intralingual transfer since it is to be traced back to spelling pronunciation. Indeed, many learners of English think that there is always a correspondence between the letters of the English alphabet and the sounds of English. As a consequence, they overgeneralize the pronunciation of the letter I of the English alphabet as /ai/, with the result that the unstressed syllables containing the letter I in the words mentioned above become stressed.

d. /a/ or /ʌ/ are often substituted for /ə/ in words like survey, surprise, surgery, surface, suppose, support, survive, supply, etc. It is not easy to discriminate between /ʌ/ and /a/ when Congolese learners pronounce these words. If they manage to realize the spelling u as /ʌ/, then this pronunciation error is the result of intralingual transfer from the overgeneralization of words containing the spelling u like in summer, substitute, supper, upper, suspect, cup, etc. On the other hand, if they realize the spelling u as /a/, in this case, the pronunciation error originates from interlingual interference from French and Congolese languages or from learning context through the teachers of English who were considered as their models of pronunciation.   Remedial strategies involve discrimination drills, listening to and repeating these discrimination drills in chorus and individually.   For example: listen to and repeat: Surgery, surgeon, surf, surface, survey, surprise, suppose, support, survive, supply, summer, supper, summit, sum, summary, upper, Sunday, funny,

e. /ɔ/ and /o/ are substituted for /ʌ/ in words like son, cover, mother, brother, recovery, discovery, above, among, etc. Discrimination drills include the following: bus-boss, bug-bog, rub-rob, luck-lock, duck-dock, and cup-cop.

Learners can also practise the following tongue twister that contains the sound /ʌ/ many times: +Mother's younger brother loves coming up to London.

f./i:/ is often substituted for/e/ in words like pleasant, peasant, measure, meadow, etc. containing the digraph ea in medial position. Such an error finds its source in intralingual interference by reference to the pronunciation of words like read, seat, meat, tea, eat, etc. in which the digraph ea is pronounced /i:/.

g./o/ is often substituted for /au/ in the word allow by analogy to the pronunciation of the words low, below, bungalow, bellow. This error results from intralingual interference within English. Discrimination drills include choral and individual repetition of the following: no-now, load-loud, tone-town, boat-bout

h./ei/ is substituted for /ai/ in the word height by analogy to the pronunciation of words like eight, weight, vein, etc. Such an error is the result of intralingual interference within English.

i. /u:/ or /ʊ / are substituted for /ʌ/ in the words blood and flood by analogy to the pronunciation of words like food, foot, loo, too, boom, good, cook. This error can be traced back to intralingual interference within English.

j. /u/ is often substituted for /ʌ/ in words like republic, public, muslim, Russia, Russian, pulse, etc. Such an error is undoubtedly the result of interlingual interference from the pronunciation of these words in French since the equivalents of these words in French involves the sound /y/ like in république [repylik],public [pyblik], musulman[mysylmã], Russie[rysi],russe [rys], pulsation[pylsasjõ].

k. /o/ is often substituted for /ʌ/ in words like love, glove, shovel, London, none, government. This error can be traced back to intralingual interference within English through spelling pronunciation as well as to interlingual interference from French.

B. At the level of consonant segments:

1.Substitution of English consonants by those of previously acquired languages:

a.[f], [s], or[t] are often substituted for [Ɵ] in words like thank, think, three, tooth, fifth, sixth, etc. in initial, medial, and final positions.

b.[d], [z], or [v] are commonly substituted for [ð] like in the words there, this, though, these, breathe, soothe, etc.

The two sounds above mentioned are among the most difficult for Congolese learners because they exist neither in French nor in Congolese languages. As a consequence, Congolese learners substitute these sounds by those to which they are familiar in previously learned languages. It is obvious that such errors are the result of interlingual transfer from previously acquired languages. Remedial strategies include discrimination drills like the following:

t ≠Ɵ : tin-thin, tree-three, part-path, tick-thick, tank-thank

s≠Ɵ: Sin-thin, sing-thing, sick-thick, pass-path

f≠Ɵ : free-three, fin-thin, fought-thought, first-thirst

v≠ð   : vat-that, clove-clothe, viz-this, vy-thy,

d≠ð   : dose-those, dare-there

z≠ð   : breeze-breathe, seize-seethe, base (v)-bathe

The following tongue twisters may also be practised: -is this the way? - This soothes them.- Does this soothe them? - Are these theirs?- These clothes are theirs. (taken from Adamczewski, H.& Keen,D., 1973)

2. Pronunciation of silent consonants:

-The letter b is often heard in the pronunciation of words like climb, comb, tomb, womb, bomb, debt, doubt, thumb, dumb, etc.

-The letter l is often heard in the pronunciation of words like talk, walk, could, would, should, chalk, half, palm, calm, etc.

-The letter k is often heard in words like knee, knife, know, knock, knowledge, etc.

-The letter p is often heard in words like psychology, pneumonia, psalm, pseudo, psychiatry, etc.

-The letter d is often heard in words like sandwich, handsome, handkerchief, Wednesday, etc.

-The letter n is often heard in words like hymn, solemn, condemn, autumn, column, etc.

Such errors are undoubtedly due to interlingual transfer from French by analogy to the way most of these words are pronounced in French.

3. Voicing of the phoneme/s/ to /z/ in words like disorder, disobey, disadvantage, disapprove, use (noun), hypocrisy, philosophy, etc. By analogy to the pronunciation of these words in French, many students pronounce these words with the sound [z] instead of [s]. Such an error results from interlingual interference from French.

4. Substitution of /R/ for [r] in words like drink, red, rose, round, drive, lorry, etc. By analogy to French words, most learners of English pronounce these words with a velar trilled /r/ sound instead of an alveolar one. Remedial strategies include discrimination drills for the pronunciation of the English /r/ in words like drink, tree, train, room, dream, road, rain. Such an error finds its source in interlingual interference from French.

5. Lack of aspiration in initial position for the phonemes /p, t, k/ like in the words pit, time, keep, pipe, pen, key, tea, etc.

This error finds its source in interlingual interference from French in which there is no aspiration at the beginning of words. On the other hand, in their efforts to apply aspiration, the learners extend it to segments that should not be aspirated. Thus, when asked to read sentences like:- He is ill   and -is he ill?, they tend to overgeneralize aspiration and realize ''He is ill'' as [hɪ hɪz hɪl] instead of [hɪ ɪz ɪl] and ''is he ill?'' as [hɪz hɪ hɪl] instead of [ɪz hɪ ɪl]. In this case, the error of overaspiration finds its source in intralingual interference within English. Remedial strategies include involving learners in reading the two sentences paying attention to where aspiration must be applied. Discrimination drills alternating words with aspiration and those without aspiration in chorus and individually can also help them self-correct, for example: Hill-ill, hedge-edge, hear-ear, hate-eight, hold-old, hair-air, harm-arm, heart-art, heat-eat, etc. The learners can also practise the following tongue twisters quickly   using aspiration only where it is necessary and dropping it where it is not necessary in quick speech: -He had his hat on his head.   - She had her hat on her head.

6. Failure to pronounce consonant sequences containing fricatives in initial and final positions in words like through, three, throw, thrive, threshold, fifth, sixth, depth, twelfth, etc. This error finds its source in interlingual interference from French.

7. Substitution of /ng/ for the velar plosive [ŋ] in words like sing, singer, finger, angry, thing, etc. This error finds its source in interlingual interference from French. However, for learners whose mother tongue is Ciluba, they take advantage of a positive transfer since the sound/ŋ/ already exists in this language and does not cause them too much trouble. The learners may be required to practise the following drills in chorus and individually: -A singer sings a song. - The song that the singer is singing was sung a long time ago by an old singer.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that twenty common pronunciation errors have been identified, among which thirteen occurred at the level of vowel segments and seven at the level of consonant segments. At the level of vowel segments, five errors find their source in interlingual interference from previously acquired languages, mostly French, and five find their source in intralingual interference within English. Three errors find their source   in both types of interference. At the level of consonant segments, six errors can be traced back to interlingual interference while one error is to be accounted for by both types of interference. The context of learning, with the teacher as the model of pronunciation (teacher's induced errors) and the learners 'learning strategies, also plays a major role in the occurrence of some errors that cannot be spotted with accuracy.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the most common pronunciation errors made by Congolese learners from the English Department of the University of Lubumbashi. Findings of the study have revealed that these errors are not likely to impair intelligibility but rather exhibit deviant features of foreignness that may cause breaks in communication and therefore deserve being remedied.

Two major sources have been identified in the occurrence of pronunciation errors made by Congolese learners, namely, interlingual interference from their L1 and French and intralingual interference within English. In spite of negative transfer of mostly French phonetic habits over English, especially at the level of vowel segments, there are other phonetic habits from French, and from the L1 to a lesser extent, which, in one way or another, have contributed to ease the acquisition of the English sound system. Other errors find their source within English as the target language through its inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation and through its phonological system. The teacher has also contributed to some of the errors as a model of pronunciation (teacher's induced errors). Finally, some errors find their sources in learners 'strategies through transfer of learning and overgeneralization.

The errors identified in this study ought to be taken as the starting point from which teachers of English in the DRC and other French-speaking countries should gain insights in their teaching of pronunciation. Choral and individual repetition drills along with tongue twisters can help as remedial strategies to fix most of the errors spotted. You tube videos available on the internet with authentic pronunciation lessons by native speakers   are other valuable resources likely to help learners improve their pronunciation to a great extent.

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