

Research Article

L2 English Pronunciation errors by Kenyan University Students: A Case of L1 Ekegusii and L1 Kimeru Speakers

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ABSTRACT

Pronunciation is a factor of two processes: the production and perception of human individual sounds (segments), referred to as phonetics and the combination of these segments in a speech, and referred to as phonology. Ekegusii and Kimeru are Bantu languages spoken in western and central parts of Kenya respectively. University students from the two language groups studying English and Literature in their year one to year four in the university setting formed the population for the study because the intonation and phonetic inventory for both languages are similar to the extent that a non-native speaker of the two languages may not draw a distinction between them. Some prosodic features of these languages such as vowel insertion to break consonant clusters are different from English and when speakers of these languages insert vowels in some English words with consonant clusters, this results in error, sometimes impeding their intelligibility. A study was needed to examine pronunciation errors among the Ekegusii L1 and Kimeru L1 university students so as to document the gravity of the problem. The study was a qualitative description of students' pronunciation errors in English language committed while the students were participating in university activities. The objectives of the study were to examine the most common mispronounced English phonemes produced by the students and to explore the possible sources of the errors. The study adopted a descriptive study design guided by Corder's (1974) error analysis model. A purposive sample of 50 students selected on the basis of first encountered first recorded was used for data generation. The data was in the form of notes from listening to the students' natural talk and audio recordings of their conversations. The study involved describing, analyzing, and interpreting common pronunciation errors. Based on the results of data analysis it was revealed that students made a multiple of pronunciation errors attributable to mainly interlingual and intralingual sources. From the findings, the researchers recommend that the best way to learn the pronunciation of a second language is by listening to good role model speakers of English language and by practising it regularly.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to examine pronunciation errors by L1 Ekegusii and Kimeru learners of L2 English. Ekegusii and Kimeru speakers are Bantu languages with distinct segmental and suprasegmental phonology from English. The two language groups that were purposively sampled and studied using a descriptive research design, for instance, are classified as tonal languages and possibly, it was expected that errors of pronunciation could be made by the university students of such L1 languages.

English was introduced in Kenya for well over a century, first as language of missionaries and early settlers, second as a language of pre-and post-colonial governments, and now as the language of official government business, language of international trade and diplomacy and official medium of education. Though it is natural that second language speakers encounter problems in pronunciation, it is noteworthy that despite years of learning English and experience, L1 Ekegusii and L1 Meru university students taking English at university still experience problems in pronunciation of L2 English words and/ or expressions. This results in error and hinders the students' ability to communicate effectively and intelligibly. According to Hornby (2008, p.352) pronunciation is a way in which a language or particular word or sound is spoken. Carter and Nunan (2001) further point out that in language learning, pronunciation is used as the production and perception of the significant sounds of a particular language in order to achieve meaning in the contexts of language use. Pronunciation errors make these students non-fluent and a liability to their profession. Students who have good pronunciation skills in speaking English are more likely to be understood better than those who have poor pronunciation ones. One of the ways of achieving good pronunciation is to have the students exposed to sufficient linguistic input as well as good role models (Krashen, 2003).

The findings of this study will help raise a red flag on the seriousness of the errors of pronunciation cited from the study. Errors that seriously impair communication can handicap the intentions of the English curriculum. Similarly, such errors are likely to stigmatize and make learning of language unenjoyable. The findings of the study will further sensitize teachers of English on the existence of such errors so that they can institute mitigating measures to minimize them. The results will further inform on various policies of training of prospective teachers of English, educational training needs and materials and areas of pedagogy in general. Since Kenya is changing its system of Education to focus on Competency-Based curriculum (CBC), the findings of this paper will be vital in setting the necessary foundations before the learners move to higher levels of learning and university.

This paper was however limited in scope as only segmental errors were captured; due to constraints of time and resources, it was not possible to address prosodic errors; it is therefore recommended that a further study is conducted on suprasegmental errors. In this respect, it will be beneficial to establish errors relating to stress, intonation, and pitch, among others. It will also be important to expand the study population to include the entire university population. This will help unfold a wide variety of errors that students from different L1 backgrounds commit as they use English language. This should be so because in Kenya, English language is used as a service subject, to teach other courses. Therefore, proficiency in the language should be encouraged; It is further recommended that L2 English be examinable. If the areas of difficulty are identified and early intervention measures employed, errors of pronunciation may be arrested at a lower level and before they find their way to the university. The study further narrowed down to students doing English and Literature as their course of study at the universities because they are prospective teachers of English.

This following subsections form part of this paper: Literature review, methodology, results and discussions and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

A keen observation reveals that pronunciation errors made by L1 Ekegusii and L1 Meru university students taking English have become more or less fossilized or fixed in the students' language. According to Selinker (1972) fossilization is the cessation of further development towards the direction of native pronunciation. Fossilized pronunciation therefore refers to pronunciation problems that linger on despite training efforts and practice. In addressing the phenomenon of error in language, Corder (1974, p.56) identified three broad categories of error: **pre-systematic, systematic, and post-systematic** errors. Corder categorized pre-systematic errors as those errors that occur when the learner is unaware of the existence of a particular rule in the target language; he further categorized systematic errors as errors that occur when the learner has discovered a rule but it happens to be the wrong rule and finally he categorized post-systematic errors as those that occur when the learner knows the correct target language rule but uses it inconsistently. Hassan (2014) argues that the most errors committed in learning a language are systematic rather than random.

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random.

Corder (1967) proposed the following steps in error analysis:

- Collection of a sample of learner language
- Error Identification
- Error Description
- Error Explanation
- Error Evaluation

Each of these steps is explained below:

The first step is the **collection of a sample of learner language**. This was achieved by listening to naturally occurring speech and recording it.

The second step is the **identification of errors**. Once a corpus of the student's language was collected, the errors in the corpus were identified. The error was conceptualized as a linguistic deviation from the norms of the target language.

The third step was the **description of the errors** which according to Ellis (1994, p.54) involve a comparison of the learner's idiosyncratic utterances.

The fourth step is the **explanation of the errors**. According to Ellis (1994, p.57), explanation is concerned with establishing the source of the error that is accounting for why it was made. In order to arrive at effective remedial measures, the analyst must understand fully the mechanism that triggers each type of error.

The source of an error could be interlanguage or intra-language.

The fifth step is the **evaluation** of errors. Ellis (1994, p.63) argues that whereas all the preceding stages of EA have involved an examination of errors from the point of view of the learners who make them, error evaluation involves a consideration of the effect that errors have on the person(s) addressed. He further argues that the effect can be gauged in terms of the addressee's affective response to the errors. The design of error evaluation studies involves decisions on who the addressee (i.e. the judges) will be, what errors they will be asked to judge and how they will be asked to judge them (Ellis,1994, p.63).

Theory

In this study, an eclectic theoretical model was adopted capturing three linguistics areas: contrastive analysis, error analysis and segmental phonology. Contrastive Analysis procedure emerged in the 1970s, and sought to predict what errors learners of L2 would face by identifying the linguistic structural differences between their L1 and the target language (Ellis 1994, p.47). Error analysis (EA) provided a methodology for investigating the language learning process on the basis of the errors committed. From a contrastive point of view, it is noted that since phonotactic rules determine which sounds are allowed and which ones are not, in each part of the syllables of English, the application of the syllable structure of Ekegusii and Kimeru on some segments of English words gave rise to errors in pronunciation.

3. Methodology

A descriptive research design was adopted in describing the existing error phenomenon in general communication in line with Donald (2010, p.440) observations that descriptive method describes events as they naturally occur. This approach involved describing, analyzing, and interpreting the conditions that existed among the subjects at the time of the study.

3.1 Sample size

The study analyzed pronunciation errors from a random sample of Ekegusii and Kimeru speaking university students in Laikipia and Maasai Mara Universities in year one to four, the first semester of 2018/ 2019 academic year. The study aimed to

investigate and describe pronunciation errors made by students in their natural classroom setting. A random sample of fifty students, 25 Ekegusii speaking and 25 Kimeru speaking were randomly observed as they interacted in the universities cited.

3.2 Instruments of data collection

The following instruments of data collection were used: **observation, interviews, documentations, audio recordings and transcription** of the data collected. The instruments are described below:

Observation

Observation is a systematic data collection approach in which there is systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study (Marshall, Rossman, and Gretchen 1989, p.79). In the case of this study the researchers observed by listening to students' talk in their natural settings and recording their utterances whenever it was expedient to do so.

Interview

According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007, p.349) interview is a flexible tool for data collection and it enables multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal and non-verbal. In this respect, the researchers interviewed some students in getting the additional information related to the data collected with respect to their pronunciation difficulties.

Documentation

Documentation is an instrument of using documents used as evidence to support data collected (Hornby (2008, p.132). Documentation in this study involved use of data from previous study by the authors involving written work in which students' examination booklets were studied with respect to their written errors.

Audio recordings

Students' utterances were occasionally recorded using mobile phone devices as the subjects engaged in natural communication

Transcription of data

The researchers transcribed recorded spoken data in notebooks and classified the pronunciation errors' types as discussed by Corder (1974, p.89)

4. Results and Discussion

Data analyzed revealed the following Ekegusii and Kimeru consonantal processes that were the genesis of interlingual and or intralingual pronunciation errors in the sample:

Epenthesis

While English allows complex syllables in which a syllable may begin with a string of three consonants in the onset position and another three or more in the coda position, Ekegusii and Kimeru have an open syllable structure: all their words invariably end with a vowel sound. The syllable has an optional onset but it cannot end with a coda. English, on the other hand, has consonant clusters in their syllables which are normally broken down by Ekegusii and Kimeru speaking students articulating English words. For example, a segment is added between two successive consonants to break the consonant cluster as in **workashop* in place of *workshop*. Ekegusii and Kimeru university students of English are likely to make errors relating to the pronunciation of consonant clusters because the sound combinations in their native languages are very much restricted. From the data collected the following were other examples of vowel insertions evident in Ekegusii and Kimeru L1 students: **/helepu/* (help), **/miliki/* (milk), **bureki/* (break), **/fu;di/* (food) **/sini/* (sin). The segments were added either at word- medial or word-final positions.

The following additional words were pronounced with epenthetic vowels:

**klasi* in place of *class/klas/*

**workashop* in place of *workshop*

**respectiffully* in place of *respectfully*

**tirip* in place of *trip*

**heni* in place of *hen*

These findings are similar to Kalaidaeh (2016) in which Arabic speakers used epenthetic vowels to break consonant clusters in English.

Prenasalisation of plosives

In addition to the insertion of vowels to break consonant clusters, consonants, particularly nasals, are also added to other consonants, and particularly plosives in the pronunciation of certain words. This is especially common among Kimeru speakers unlike Ekegusii speakers. In this process the insertions are made so as to create a phonologically acceptable sound sequence in accordance with Kimeru phonology. Plosive sounds and their corresponding added nasals are homorganic consonants in which the nasal is assimilated to the place of articulation of the corresponding plosive. This is consistent with Ogden (2009) who notes that a nasal usually comes before a plosive consonant which shares the same place of articulation in clusters such as: mb, mp, nt, nd, and njk. From the data corpora in Kimeru, the voiced alveolar stop /d/ pronounced in error was preceded by an alveolar nasal /n/ as in **ndigri:/* (degree) in place of /digri:/; the English words “dinner” /'dina(r)/ and “game” /geim/ were pronounced as **ndina(r)/* and **ngeim/* respectively. Other examples included: **visitend* in place of *visited**; **cemenry* in place of *cemetery*; **bendroom* in place of *bedroom* and **loundly* in place of *loudly*. A close observation shows that Kimeru prenasalisation is done at the initial, mid and final word positions of words such as in **ngoond* for good and **tombacco* for tobacco.

However, it is important to note that Ekegusii and Kimeru have a few cases of double articulated phonemes such as **bw, nd, nt, nk, mb, ndws, ntwa, nkw, ngw**, which are sometimes difficult to distinguish from prenasalised phonemes but which do not have a direct effect on pronunciation of corresponding English phonemes.

Consonant Substitution

When a university student whose L1 is Kimeru or Ekegusii sometimes speaks English several consonants are substituted to conform with the consonant sounds in Kimeru and Ekegusii. For example, the lateral liquid /l/ in English is replaced by /r/ in Kimeru and Ekegusii. Further examples were: **reit/* for late /leit/, **raiz/* for lice /laiz/; the English word “look” /luk/ was pronounced as **ruk/*; similarly, /s/ was substituted with /z/. For example, “zeal” /zi:l/ was pronounced as **si:l/*. Similarly, the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ in spoken English is replaced by its voiceless counterpart /s/ as in **sip/* for zip, **soo/* for zoo **seburu/* for zebra.

It was noted that words in English containing the voiced labio-dental obstruent /v/ such a phoneme was replaced by a voiceless counterpart /f/ particularly among Ekegusii speakers. This was probably the case because voice is a marked feature in Ekegusii as in: **fote/fout/* for vote /vout/ and **fomit/for vomit/* vomit/. Similarly, among Ekegusii speakers the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ is replaced by the voiced bilabial fricative /β/ in Ekegusii as in: **βipl/* (people), **βost/* (post), **βonda/*(powder). In the same language, a voiced palato-alveolar affricate /dʒ/ was substituted with its voiceless counterpart /tʃ/ in words such as register, judge, jack to read as *rechister, chuch, chack*.

Among both Ekegusii and Kimeru speakers the palato alveolar fricative /ʃ/ is replaced by /s/ as in **sop/* for shop, and **seik/* for shake. Among Ekegusii speakers, the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð / were replaced by the sound /t/ as in **tank* instead of **thank**, **mote* instead of **mother**, **tink* instead of **think**. In both speakers of Ekegusii and Kimeru, the voiced palate-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ was replaced by the sound /s/ as in *measure, pleasure*.

The substituted sounds are distinct phonemes that are meaning distinguishing. According to (Baker, 2006) for instance, the /p/ and /b/ are two independent phonemes because they distinguish meaning. The above substitutions were done in such a way that the unmarked L1 form is used to compensate for the missing counterpart in L2.

Metathesis

This is a process where two segments are interchanged within a word without a change in meaning as shown in the following examples: **Kioski - kioksi* (kiosk), **deks* for desks where /sk/ interchanges with /ks/, as witnessed among both Ekegusii and Kimeru students.

Regularization of the English past tense and plural allomorphs

The English past tense morpheme /ed/ can be realized by different allophones; /d/, /id/and /t/ depending on the phonetic environment. /t/ is realized after voiceless sounds except itself as in packed /pakt/, cats /kaets/. /d/ is released after voiced sounds except itself as in tagged /taegd/ and /id/ occurs after plosives as in wedded /wedid/, painted /peintid/. From the study findings, both groups of students, however, failed to observe these rules in producing English words. The same case applied to the English plural morpheme /s/ whose allophones: /s/, /z/ and /iz/ that are also phonologically conditioned. /s/ follows voiceless sounds such as cats /kaets/; /z/ follows voiced sounds as in bags /baegz/ and /iz/ follows sibilants such as

/s/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/. The students failed to observe these rules and instead generalized by adopting one form /d/ and /s/ for past tense and plurality respectively to represent the others.

Deletion

Ekegusii and Kimeru lack certain phonemes in its sound inventory. This affects how Kimeru and Ekegusii speaking students articulate certain English words. For instance, the omission of the glottal fricative /h/ in the pronunciation of English words as indicated in the following words: *ouse /aus/ instead of house /hauz/, *at instead of /hat/, and *ot instead of /hot/. Further examples include: *as in place of /has/ *and in place of *hand*

* sop in place of *shop*; * soo in place of /zoo/

Errors of spelling pronunciation

Roach (2009) points out that it is important to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes rather than graphemes. This is, however, problematic in English because there is no correspondence between spelling and sounding as it is in Ekegusii and Kimeru. For the latter languages, there are no silent graphemes in their orthography and therefore this means that every letter in a word forms part of a syllable and must be produced. But in English, for historical reasons, silent letters are common in words such as: *lamb*, *comb*, *womb*, *tomb*, *corps*. These silent letters are, however, likely to be produced by Ekegusii and Kimeru speakers in pronouncing English words as they remain “marked features”. According to Eckman (1977) and Selinker (1992) marked features in language are likely to be more difficult to acquire than their unmarked counterparts.

Generally, three types of errors were noted from the study corpus: These were:

Pre-systematic Errors

These errors’ type occurred when the students were unaware of the errors.

Systematic Errors

The students were fully aware of the rule but nevertheless they made errors in pronouncing the words where the rule applied. They also could not evaluate and correct the errors. See the word *beautiful* which was pronounced by students as /'biutiful/ yet the correct pronunciation is /'bju:tɪfl/.

Post-Systematic Errors

These errors occurred when the students comprehended the correct pronunciation but they used the rules inconsistently. Further, the types of post-systematic errors were done by some students. The pronunciation of the article “*the*” alternated between /ði/ and /ðe/ regardless of the following sound. The rule says that the article “*the*” must be pronounced /ðe/ if the article *the* is followed by a word beginning with a consonant and as /ði/ is followed by a word beginning with a vowel.

The Causes of Students’ Pronunciation Errors

The study notes that a good number of Ekegusii and Kimeru speaking university students (40%) have difficulties in producing some sounds as they have already formed habits of speech appropriate to their own language and those habits are firmly fixed and are not easily eradicated in pronouncing English sounds. Both Ekegusii and Kimeru and English do not have the same phonological systems. These languages have appreciable differences in their phonological inventories and structures. As opposed to Kimeru and Ekegusii, in English, to a large extent, there exists no correspondence between sounding and spelling (orthography). Ekegusii and Kimeru speaking university students are likely to be affected negatively when they speak English because the two language systems are different.

As a result of the above reality, mother tongue conditioning errors occurred as a result of the use of elements from one language while speaking another while intralingual errors reflected the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn the conditions of the rules’ applied. Other errors occurred when the subjects built up hypotheses about the target language on the basis of limited experience.

In respect of mother tongue conditioning errors, the students were influenced by the sound system of their first languages. This is possible because a learner may encounter sounds in English that do not exist in their native language sound inventory. Difficulties probably arose because the phonotactic rules for combining sounds into words were different in the learners’ native language. Both Ekegusii and Kimeru have an open syllable structure. As a result of these differences, the native language affects the ability of the learners to comprehend and produce English sounds accurately. In this case, the students’ first languages’ accent and culture influenced the student’s pronunciation of English. Students who shared the same mother tongue, tended to use that language because it is easier and students felt less exposed if they spoke in it than if they spoke in English.

During the researchers' class observation, it was noticed that most students spoke in their mother tongue when they discussed. The students explained that their fear of making mistakes in front of their classmates was the reason for not speaking so openly in the class using English as 'my classmates will laugh at me if I make mistakes or errors'. This is consistent with Ur (1996, p.78) who cite inhibition and dominations as some of the factors that cause difficulty in speaking. The interview with students also pointed out that they had difficult to pronounce some words when they try to state an opinion in speaking. One of them said, 'I do not know how to say it, and I am not sure of my pronunciation'. The researchers identified that some students made the pronunciation/ phonological errors for /b/ sound. Some students, especially the Kisii ones had difficulties in pronouncing words that use phoneme /p/ in word initial position. They tended to pronounce the phoneme /p/ as if it were /b/ in words such as *people pack, pile, compile, project*, and others. This is consistent with Bose (2005) who argues that most of the errors in pronunciation are due to the interference of the mother tongue. The of concept negative transfer is used to describe a case where a learner transfers their L1 habits to the target language but these habits do not conform to the target language and this results in an error. If the learner of a second language makes some errors in the target language by the effect of their mother tongue, that is called interlingual error. According to Richards (1974, p.124) the sources of errors in studying a language might be derived from the interference of the learners' mother tongue and the general characteristics of the rule learning.

Another cause of students' pronunciation errors was *intra-lingual error in the target language itself*. It was reflected by students' general characteristics of rule learning. It included to inhibition, students are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism, or simply shy. Based on the data analyzed, students were likely to make errors by generalization. For example, /s/ and /ed/ plural and past tense forms respectively were generalized in all word positions yet /s/ has three variants: [s, z, iz] while /ed/ has three variants too: [t, d, id] pronounced in accordance with the voicing of the preceding sound. In addition, the researchers also found out that students had difficulties in pronouncing among others sounds such as /s/ and /z/, /f/ and /v/, or /δ/ and /θ/. In the case of the target language the students *make errors in the target language, since* they do not know the target language very well and have difficulties in using it. This error occurred because of students' lack of sufficient input from the target language.

5. Conclusion

Given that the use of English in oral communication is one of the most sought after skill there is need to worry about pronunciation of English by university students, especially those taking English because they are the future teachers and mastering the correct pronunciation of English words is the most important factor in teaching English. English speaking ability has become a necessity in this globalized world. English is also a medium of communication in many universities and in Kenya, English is the official medium of communication. Although university students are not expected to aspire to acquire native-like accent, pronunciation errors that stigmatize or seriously hinder communication should be pointed out. The focus of this study was Ekegusii L1 as well as Kimeru L1 university students in their day to day communication in L2 English. Most of the students studied were Bachelor of Education students of English. It was apparent from the study corpus that Ekegusii and Kimeru student speakers committed almost similar types of errors. On the part of the latter students from the study findings, it was evident that both Ekegusii and Kimeru student speakers committed many errors of pronunciation in English language. Sounds that occur in English but do not appear in the phonemic inventory of these languages gave students difficulties to articulate them. Voiced sounds particularly gave students problems in pronouncing them. The students took advantage of their mothertongue sound system and features to produce words in English language. The sources of errors in the students' pronunciation in English could be attributed to mother tongue conditioning. The differences in the two study groups' native languages and English as the target languages probably posed a great challenge in the pronunciation skills. The study results indicated that about 40% of the study population made errors of pronunciation. This is especially those who may have had lack of adequate exposure to English language at an early age or who may have had poor role models. However, if correct intervention procedures are put in place such as the students being exposed to a variety of correct spoken texts and perfect role models, the students can overcome most of the errors.

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