



On Allophones: Lecturers' and Students' Use of the [ði] and the [ðə]

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Abstract

The paper presents an examination of both teachers and students use of appropriate allophones in different environment pronunciation among lecturers and students of English language and related courses. The study is premised on the fact that poor quality of spoken English has been observed among graduates of English in polytechnics within and outside Nigeria. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methodology to assess and determine the performances of lecturers and students in selected institutions in Nigeria and Uganda. A reading exercise was administered on the research subjects, and the results showed some lecturers and students hardly differentiated the appropriate pronunciation of [ði] from [ðə] in their respective environments with a mean percentage of 48%. In fact, hardly were they able to appropriately apply [ðə] such in reading exercise. The study recommended that lecturers of English should ensure they pay due attention allophones in their spoken English. Also, they should ensure that they emphasised allophones when teaching oral English in tertiary institutions. It was further suggested that oral drills should be incorporated into the curriculum of tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Allophones; Phonology; Teaching; English language; Learning; Pronunciation

1. Introduction

The most important feature of human beings is communication through the medium of language. Gimson (1969), explains that a man possessing the normal human faculties achieves this exchange of information mainly by means of two types of sensory stimulation, auditory and visual. It is, therefore, expected that a child grows with the ability to communicate to other people using language. On language, (Akinkurolere, 2011) submits that 'language is a means by which humans communicate with one another through the use of a set of vocal symbols' while Akindele and Adegbite (1999) define language as 'a system of sound or vocal symbols by which human beings communicate experience'. No doubt, language is a medium of communication whether in spoken and written form.

In any language, the list or inventory of sounds is quite crucial and individuals' learning of such language requires appropriate mental lexicon which operates at three levels of phonology, syntax and meaning. Phonology is a level of language study that borders on sounds system, while phonetics examines articulation and production of sound patterns. Hence, the linguistic approach to the study is phonology. According to Katamba (1989), "the various physically distinct sounds which count as executions of a given phoneme are called the ALLOPHONES (or variants). He rightly observes that sounds are grouped together as members of the same phoneme when the real physical differences between them happen to be functionally immaterial with respect to the language being described.

In phonological structure of a syllable involves onset, nucleus and coda. The nucleus is the vowel sound while onset and coda are consonants which could be optional. Allophones are variants of a phoneme and in complementary distribution. 'The' is a definite article in English language which has two allophones, which are basically [ði] and [ðə]. Allophones are usually suppressed in writing as there are no orthographic differences between allophones of a phoneme. No wonder (Katamba, 1989) argues thus:

The phoneme is an abstraction. What actually occur are the allophones-to be precise PHONES i.e. particular phoneme... All sounds used in a language belong to some phoneme. Some phonemes have numerous allophones others may have a less diverse membership...on this view, the phoneme is a minimal sound unit which is capable of contrasting word meaning.

The phonological environment determines different allophones. The first sound, whether a vowel sound or consonant, that follows 'the' determines the variant of the vowel sound [i] or [ə]. Also, Gimson (1969) argues that since the realization of any phoneme differs according to the context in which it occurs...the same types of allophonic variation, involving a change of the soft palate, may be found within the word and also at word boundaries.

Production of consonants is different from the production of vowels. However, in as much as students and lecturers are aware of the import of phonological environments on allophones, the knowledge has not duly reflected in their oral expression, therefore, this research conducts an investigation the use of allophones by both students and lecturers of English in order to bring to assess use and misuse of allophones among them.

English Language teachers, at any level, are (and should always be) standard bearers and students across the globe are looking up to this category of people as such. Notwithstanding, quality of graduates from various schools

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and institutions today portray wide gap between the expected and the reality. Indeed, scholars have recommended review of curricula at different levels of education, employment of qualified personnel, adequate monitoring and supervision, provision of good learning environment, and good remuneration for staff among factors that could extrinsically and intrinsically motivate teachers to teach effectively; yet how teachers teach English Received Pronunciation (ERP) determines what students learn and apply.

Various studies have been conducted on phonological analysis of children speech. Such studies include (Baker, 2004) that presents a model for phonological known as Phonological Analysis Summary and Management Plan (PASMP), which may be used to summarise the results of phonological analysis, and direct clinical decision-making especially when managing phonological impairments in children. Others are core vocabulary approach (Dodd and Bradford, 2000); phonotactic therapy (Velleman, 2002), language based intervention Tyler (2002) and metaphonological intervention (Gillon, 2000; Hesketh et al., 2000). The identified studies are phonological therapies but the focus of this research, though adapting some aspect of Baker (2004) model of phonological analysis, is on adults, who have received formal training in English Phonology. More so, the distinction also lies on its essential focus on performance.

2. Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to study the recognition and use of allophones of phonemes in different environments among teachers and students of English Language towards achieving the following specific objectives:

- i) To assess the performance of selected teachers and students of different allophones of the nucleus in ‘the’.
- ii) To compare the realizations of allophones [ði] from [ðə] through an appropriate passage.
- iii) To determine measures of increasing awareness of allophones in English studies.

3. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative content analysis because documented data will be analysed by adopting a descriptive approach and dealing with frequency counts, and percentages. The data were drawn from fifteen research subjects; ten readings of lecturers and five readings of postgraduate students (Master). The lecturers were purposively selected on the basis of those that were on Master’s programme or have completed their Master less than five years. A short and one-paragraph composition comprising five [ði] and five [ðə] were read by both lecturers and students.

The lecturers are academic staff in a public polytechnic in Nigeria and the postgraduate students are selected from a private university in Uganda, a public university in Nigeria and a private university in Nigeria on the ratio of 3:1:1. The five students were purposively based on their nationality from South-Sudan (1), Rwanda (1), Uganda (1) and Nigeria (2). The choice of research that cut across natives of different nations was meant enhance contrastive analysis of perceptions based on linguistic backgrounds. In Nigeria, two postgraduate students were selected on the basis of one from a private institution and one from a public institution.

This purposive selection was based on lecturers of English language and students studying English and Linguistics. The analysis of the data served as the basis for discussion, findings, and recommendations. For easy reference, the five students are captured as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, while lecturers are labeled as L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9, L10. Also, ‘R’ was inserted in the column for appropriate pronunciation while ‘W’ was inserted for incorrect pronunciation. Ethical considerations were adequately addressed as names of institutions were not mentioned in the paper because of the sensitivity of the research.

4. Analysis and Results

The readings were transcribed by the researchers, analysed and represented in tabular form as follows:

	[ði] ¹	[ði] ²	[ði] ³	⁴ [ði]	⁵ [ði]	[ðə] ¹	[ðə] ²	[ðə] ³	[ðə] ⁴	[ðə] ⁵
L1	R	W	W	R	R	R	W	W	W	R
L2	W	R	R	R	R	W	W	W	W	W
L3	R	R	W	R	R	W	R	W	W	W
L4	W	W	R	R	R	W	W	W	W	W
L5	R	R	W	R	R	W	R	W	W	W
L6	R	R	R	W	R	W	W	R	W	R
L7	R	R	R	W	R	W	W	W	W	W
L8	R	W	R	R	R	W	W	W	W	W
L9	R	R	W	R	R	W	R	R	W	W
L10	R	R	R	R	R	W	W	W	W	W
S1	R	R	R	R	R	W	W	W	W	W
S2	W	W	W	W	W	R	R	R	R	R
S3	R	W	R	W	W	W	W	W	R	R
S4	R	W	R	R	W	R	R	W	W	W
S5	R	R	R	R	R	W	W	W	W	W
Frequency/percentage	13 87%	09 60%	10 67%	11 73%	12 80%	03 20%	05 33%	03 20%	02 13%	04 27%
									Mean %	48%

It is imperative to state that the frequencies and percentages were not based on each research subject but on general performance of the subjects in the pronunciation of each item on the table. From the analysis, the mean percentage of [ði] was 73.4 while that of [ðə] was 22.6. This made the cumulative mean percentage 48%.

5. Findings and Discussion

Most English students and lecturers do not consciously apply appropriate allophones. At the level of Master in English or Linguistics, individuals have studied Phonetics and Phonology to an advance stage, therefore, it was expected that lecturers and potential lecturers must have mastered the nitty-gritty in phonetics. Indeed, the research subjects have studied Phonology at an advance level (Master). It was also observed and further established that speakers of different languages, as first language, will have somewhat different phonetic realizations of allophones of the phonemes.

It is observed that the lecturers were aware of the allophones in [ði] and [ðə] as the researchers interrogated them after the reading practice but they never placed premium on them. 90% of the lecturers knew when to use each of the allophone under investigation. Whereas, only 40% of the students understood the difference between [ði] and [ðə] and they are also teachers of English. Therefore, it was obvious that teaching of oral English helps to create awareness. The wide gap between competence and performance is their attitudes which also affect their students' learning outcomes.

Kumuyi (2016) rightly observes that 'many language teachers in Nigeria might never find themselves in Native English setting, in fact, most of them do not teach the natives so it is pointless to pretend otherwise'. The fact that most teachers of English never studied the language in a native speaker setting or taught by native speakers also affected their attitudes towards the importance of allophones. To a typical Nigerian teacher of English, it is needless differentiating aspirated and unaspirated plosive stop in lexical items 'pool' [P^hu:l] and 'spool' [spul] which are phonetically different. [p], [p^h], and [p^h] are allophones of the /p/ phoneme and are in complementary distribution.

Significantly, both lecturers and students made use wrong phonetic realisations such as [ða] and [ðe]. These are wrong realizations for [ðə]. Indeed, 60% of wrong realisations are as a resultant effect of this mispronunciation. Therefore, such subjects were aware of the [ðə] realisation of item 'the'. Also, none of the institutions, where lecturers are teaching had a language laboratory, which is a major cause of wrong phonetic realizations because there was oral support. This denies students from accessing practical drills of the standard pronunciation since dependence on the teachers, who are mostly non-native speakers of English, did not provide the needed knowledge on allophones.

From the analysis, some allophones are easily realised than others as the mean percentage of [ði] was 73.4 with the minimum of 60% correct realisation confirms this fact, while that of [ðə] was 22.6. This made the cumulative mean percentage 48%. Also, 40% of the student perceived 'the' as either [ði] or [ðə] through the reading practice (see S1 and S2). Consequently, they either all instances of [ði] or [ðə] right while they missed the other.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends measures or ways of improving teaching and learning of Phonology in tertiary institutions. Firstly, there should be emphasis on the use of technologically based teaching of oral English. This implies that computer-based oral drills are important which will expose the students and lecturers to practical learning and teaching. They will also be able to acquire native-like competence in English pronunciation.

Also, there is the need for a change of teachers' attitudes. The allophones are as important as phonemes but they do not create semantic contrast. Therefore, the allophones of phonemes are usually taken for granted by teachers of English. Students should be made to understand phonemes' behaviors in different environments as phonetic realizations which they must comply with their rules in pronunciation. A positive attitude and appropriate use of allophones will also influence the students' attitudes towards allophones.

Moreover, test of Oral English or Phonology should include allophones. It is rampant among students to pay less attention to aspects that are not usually tested in examinations. Therefore, examinations' items at all levels should include test of allophones. This will encourage students to devote more time and energy in studying them and their performance will improve significantly. For example, /l/ is a phonemic or abstract category while [l] and [ɫ] in English are allophones; [l] never occurs before consonants or word-finally, [ɫ] never occurs before vowels). To test this, students can be provided with words including /l/ and be required to indicate whether the allophone in each word is [l] and [ɫ].

It is further recommended that an experimental study on the use of allophones through phonological therapies should be conducted. This will reveal further ways of improving students' performances in Oral English.

7. Conclusion

The study has called attention to the performance of the standard bearers in English Language. The performance discovered from the analysis was below expectation for such category of individuals. Therefore, the study concludes that students most students and teachers of English do not pay attention to allophones. The chunk of the problem is caused by an assumption that phonemes are allophones are the same and inadequate mastery of speech sounds in English Language. The mentioned suggestions are by no means exhaustive but they will go a long way to improve the performance of teachers and students in English. The study has not only created an awareness on allophones for all users of English language but it has provided added contribution to academic debates that border on English phonetics and phonology.

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Appendix

A Short Composition

Once upon a time, ¹the people living in ²the town of Arorere decided to kill the king and the ¹ assistant king in ³the village. After a while, ⁴the leaders of the ² agitators ensured that the ³ helpers working in the palace knew nothing about the ⁴ agitators' plan. On ⁵the fateful day, the ⁴ intention was carried out and another king was appointed to rule in his stead.