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## The difficulty in articulating consonant sounds among ESL students in Okuapemman School

Joyce Amponsah Animah \*, Christiana Awuni and Miriam Korkoa Mordey

*Graduate students, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Education, Winneba.*

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### Abstract

The study looked at the difficulty in articulating consonant sounds among second-year ESL students in Okuapemman schools. The participants were 20 students that were chosen at random. Face-to-face oral pronunciation tests were used in this study. The chosen participants were forced to pronounce words that were carefully chosen from a form 2 English textbook, with a focus on consonant sounds. It was realised that Students have difficulty articulating some consonant sounds in English after the study. The researcher also realised that the difficulty in articulating the sounds were due to several factors such as L1 influence, overgeneralization and lack of exposure. This study also suggested that ESL teachers be exposed to proper ways for teaching good pronunciation in order to help ESL students to learn how to pronounce words correctly.

**Keywords:** Consonant sounds; Articulation; Voiced sounds; Voiceless sounds; Pronunciation

### 1. Introduction

Pronunciation training is essential in the teaching of English as second language (ESL) (Jahan, 2011). Given that the majority of ESL students want to speak English like a native speaker, the importance of teaching pronunciation cannot be emphasized (Derwing, 2003). (2006) (Hismanoglu). Teachers must, without a doubt, aid English learners in improving the ability to meet communication needs and to be clearly understood (Morley, 1991). Many English second language learners (ESLs) have difficulty learning the language. When learning English, ESL students have a wide range of accents. To be sure, teachers should be mindful of pronunciation differences when working with ESL students in order to increase their competency articulation in English (Morley, 1991). Teachers, in particular, must improve their knowledge of diverse sound patterns and get insight into the present pronunciation variations that ESL students confront. Teachers working with pupils from various backgrounds, in particular, must be well-versed in the subject.

Students learning English as a second language (ESL) in Ghana have difficulties with all aspects of the language, including reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Most of the time, in classroom instruction, the other components are heavily emphasized, whereas pronunciation is given less attention. Furthermore, scholars have rarely chosen pronunciation as a research topic. In a study conducted by Madden (1997, p.5), comparison to other areas of language learning such as grammar, communicative competence, and sociocultural awareness, there are few research publications in the topic of pronunciation. According to the preceding statement, teachers should tolerate the pronunciation of ESL students because they are not native speakers, but they can assist them in learning the essential principles of spoken English so that they can be understood by others.

In my experience as a teacher, forcing children to enunciate or articulate words is counterproductive. It can be frustrating and boring, especially for young ESL students, if they are unable to pronounce words correctly. Despite the

\* Corresponding author: Joyce Amponsah Animah.

fact that pronunciation is not a fundamental English skill for the ESL Learner, it is critical for them to master. To avoid misunderstandings, ESL teachers ought to help ESL learners improve their speaking skills. In view of the above, the focus of this article was on mispronunciation of sounds, particularly on consonant sounds. The article focused on Senior high ESL students specifically Okuapemman Schools as the case study. The researcher is more interested in researching senior high students' pronunciation errors because they find difficulty in articulating some of the consonant sounds.

The four basic skills required to acquire a new language are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The most frequent form of human communication is speaking, which is referred to as pronunciation. From the very first class, pronunciation should be emphasized. Hearing and creating sounds correctly may help you avoid future misunderstandings. Despite the fact that pronunciation is an important part of spoken language, it is usually disregarded or undervalued. When teaching and practicing speaking, even when all four basic abilities are taught, the emphasis is typically on the content rather than the manner. The fact that form and content are closely related, and that improving pronunciation enhances learners' listening skills at the same time, is overlooked by ESL teachers. Pronunciation is important for a multitude of reasons. A person's total language proficiency is revealed by their pronunciation. Proper pronunciation is also required for effective communication. Because certain pronunciation problems sound identical, it's critical to make learners aware of them. A speaker from another linguistic community may find it challenging to understand a learner who frequently mispronounces a range of phonemes. This can be quite irritating for a student who has a strong command of syntax and lexis but finds it difficult to understand and be understood by a native English speaker. Incorrect application of supra-segmental factors such as stress or issues with intonation can also arise. As a result, pronunciation teaching should be included in all classroom activities on a regular basis. The purpose of this article is to identify some of the most typical errors that ESL students make when pronouncing consonant sounds.

### **1.1. Purpose of the Study**

The main goal of this study is to identify pronunciation problems in some consonant sounds made by Okuapemman School and to suggest ways in solving that problem and to offer educators with a basic overview of ESL students' pronunciation difficulty in articulating consonant sounds that are typically seen in various classrooms

### **1.2. The Scope of the Study**

The research was conducted at Okuapemman School in Ghana's Eastern Region, which is a special area of interest to the researcher. In terms of context, the research focused on consonant sound articulation faults. The article determined the variety of errors made by ESL students in the articulation of consonant sounds.

### **1.3. Significance of study**

The findings of the study will assist teachers of ESL in different schools concerned with the teaching of English in paying attention to student's pronunciation errors. It will also help the ESL teacher to make use of the various pronunciation teaching method. The study will also be useful to other researchers in the field of education especially teachers and students who seeks to pursue a career as teachers of ESL to develop ways to improve the pronunciation of their students in ESL classroom.

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## **2. Literature review**

This section provides a summary of the researchers' perspectives on the topic. These will contain an overview of phonetics and phonology; this part will also capture an except on the articulation of consonants sounds since it's the focus of the research. This section will also highlight on scholar's view about some of elements that influence pronunciation.

### **2.1. Overview of phonology and phonetics**

Pronunciation is related to learning to produce the sound correctly. According to (Panevova& Hana 2010, p.1), phonology focuses on sounds and how sounds are organized in a particular language. So, in phonology, the students learn about systematic sound in human language. At the same time, phonetics is a science that discusses how sound can be formed by using some parts of the body like the lip, tooth, tongue, pharynx, and lungs. Therefore, you will only be able to completely appreciate how sounds are used in English speech if you study both the phonetics and phonology of the language (Roach 2000, p. 40). Phonology is a term with various definitions all of which agree on its being the study of patterns of sounds. Different linguists promoted; though different, but still similar in the concept, definitions of phonology. Kenstowicz (2014) defined it as a study of the pattern concerned with both selection and use of sounds in the language. Yule (2017) states that phonology is a description of the system and pattern of speech sounds in a language. Yet that is in relation to abstract and mental aspects of the sounds in language instead of the actual physical

articulation of speech sounds (Yule 2016, p.88). Visonil and Marlina (2020) state that phonology is mainly concerned with those rules which if written can show the types of phonetic relationship. Moreover, it deals with the occurrence of some sounds, which linguists call phonological environment. An example of that is the sound /l/ which is dentalized when occurring before the interdental sound /θ/ as in the words wealth and health. Other times, it is realized as a dark /l/ as when it is the initial or final sound like the words [hill, like and skill] when preceded or followed by a vowel. Therefore, phonology demonstrates those different patterning rules and how sounds are put together. Phonetics on the other hand is believed to study sounds. Mahon (2002, p.27) mentioned that it provides objective ways of describing and analysing the range of sounds humans use in their languages. To set it forth, phonetics is classified as acoustic. It is a branch of linguistics that studies the production of speech sounds. In English we have vowel and consonant sounds which are mostly used in the articulation of speech sounds.

There are 24 consonants and in most English sounds some are voiced and some are voiceless based on their manner of articulation. In describing consonants, there are three main points according to which consonants are classified. They are: 1) the state of the glottis, 2) place of articulation and 3) manner of articulation. Glottis is the space between the vocal cords. It is the end of the pipe Roach (2002). The vocal cords are flexible flesh that closes and opens. When they are open, the air passes through them. The state of glottis is either: a.) opening or b.) Vibrating. When the glottis vibrates, it produces voiced sounds; when it is open, it produces voiceless sounds. Voiced sounds are the sounds produced when the vocal cords are vibrating while voiceless sounds are sounds produced when the glottis is open. Different sounds are produced from different places. (Roach, 2002) There are eight places for producing English sounds which are bilabial, interdental, alveolar, alveo-palatal, palatal, velar, and glottis. A vowel is a voiced sound in producing of which the air comes out in a continuous stream through the pharynx and the mouth; there is no obstruction or narrowing which could cause audible friction. To add to the above description of consonants Fromkin et al. (2011, p. 560) further explained, "Consonant is speech sound produced with some constriction of the air stream". Consonant in English pronunciation is included in segmental phonemes (Low 2015, p.63). In English, consonant divides into two basic positions: voiced and voiceless. The voiced sound is produced when the vocal folds are drawn together, the air from the lungs repeatedly pushes them apart as it passes through, creating a vibration effect, meanwhile, the voiceless sound is produced when the vocal folds are spread apart, the air from the lungs passes between them unimpeded (Yule 2014, p.27). Low (2015, p. 66) mentioned there are 24 consonants in British English sound system in which there are fifteen voiced consonants (/b/, /d/, /dʒ/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /z/, /ʒ/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /l/, /r/, /w/, and /j/) and nine voiceless consonants (/p/, /t/, /tʃ/, /k/, /f/, /θ/, /s/, /ʃ/, and /h/.

## 2.2. Factors influencing pronunciation

There are several factors that influence ESL students in mispronunciation, the following highlights on researchers view on some of the factors influencing mispronunciation. These factors include; L1 influence, Exposure and Enthusiasm, Overgeneralisation and mode of instruction.

## 2.3. L1 influence

L1 influence is a contributing factor. According to (Avery & Ehrlich, 1987), learners who speak different languages speak a target language in different ways. The way they speak the target language is sometimes slightly different and sometimes highly different from that of native speakers. (Kenworthy, 1987) also stated that the native language is the most influential factor in accounting for students' pronunciation, especially foreign accents. If the students are familiar with the sound system of their native language, they will be able to effectively diagnose their own difficulties. In this sense, as asserted by (Senel, 2006), it should be noteworthy that interference or negative transfer from the first language is likely to cause errors in aspiration, intonation, rhythm, and melody in the target language. For example, these problems can occur when the rules for combining the sounds in syllable forms are different in two languages. Also lack of exposure. Linguists distinguish between two types of L1 to L2 transfer. One of these is positive transfer, in which shared similarities between L1 and L2 are acquired effortlessly. In other words, L1 will aid in the acquisition of information. One of these is positive transfer, in other words, if the language feature in L1 is similar to the equivalent aspect in L2, L1 will aid in the acquisition of that language aspect. Negative transfer or interference is the second type, in which the discrepancies between L1 and L2 are likely to produce difficulties in learning L2.

According to Binturki (2008), Arab learners who have difficulty with new sounds (such as / and /v/) tend to substitute these sounds with those from their own language. According to Swan (2001), a native speaker can discern between the /p/ and /b/ sounds. However, not all errors are caused by the influence of the mother tongue. Obviously, regardless of the impact their mother language has on ESL students in general and pronunciation in particular, different ESL students around the world make some pronunciation issues. Learning to speak English fluently is a tough ability for students to build and learn, particularly in the setting of second language acquisition learners, who have limited exposure to English and less opportunities to talk communicatively. For foreign language learners, Gass and Selinker (2001) identify three

key sources of input: "(a) teacher, (b) materials, and (c) other learners." "Acquiring fluency in a second or foreign language is becoming increasingly important as the demand for global competency, international communication, and collaboration grows, and this proficiency should include not only vocabulary and grammar, but also strong pronunciation" (Lord, 2008:374-389). Many studies in the field of (SLA) have focused on the factors that prevent second language learners from acquiring native-like pronunciation (O'Connor 200, p.22; Yule 2003, p.25). Some linguistic issues have been highlighted by researchers and linguists, such as the disparities in sound systems between (L1) and (L2), the inconsistency of some sounds in the English language, mother tongue interference, and the impact of spelling on pronunciation.

#### **2.4. Exposure and Enthusiasm**

Exposure is of great essence since it enables the learners to have replicas to follow and to have appraisals between varieties of a language (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Donovan, 2002). Phonetic Capability It is reported that learners living in English-speaking localities are likely to attain better pronunciation since they are enthralled in the language. Nevertheless, not all learners are raised in an English-speaking background. According to Brophy (2010), motivation is the degree to which learners could devote time and energy towards different responsibilities, objectives or actions. Learner's inspiration could influence the existing learning in addition to the abilities and approaches studied hitherto (Schunk et al., 2008). Balboni (2012, p.8) argues that motivation constitutes the energy responsible for the memorization of new information and it is vital for the acquisition of a second language. In fact, there is a very strong link between motivation and attitude. Kenworthy (1990) states "in many studies of attitude and motivation in language learning, it has been shown that those learners who show positive feelings towards the speakers of the new language tend to develop more accurate, native-like accents. Inspiration is the power that propels an individual to attain an objective. On the contrary, the absence of motivation makes the learning process highly difficult. Enthusiasm is the tenets, principles and conducts that drive the learning process. Some dynamic tenets could result in enthusiasm; however, other principles could result in resolute industriousness. By motivating students, teachers get them to learn better. All things being equal, people have the equal capability to learn a language. However, the social environment has an excessive influence toward learning since a person learns the language that he is exposed to and not necessarily the mother tongue.

#### **2.5. Overgeneralization**

In language acquisition, overgeneralisation is the process of extending the application of a rule to items that are excluded from it in the language norm. or as Al-Baldawi said, "Overgeneralization is the phenomenon when one overextends one rule to cover instances to which that rule does not apply." This phenomenon may appear in different aspects such as semantic, syntactic, morphology, or phonology. Overgeneralization is primarily an innate faculty of the human mind Richards cites overgeneralization as one of the contributory factors. He explains thus: "Overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language." (Richards 1974).

#### **2.6. Mode of instruction**

Another influence is attributed to the mode of instruction. ESL instruction generally focuses on four main areas of development: listening, speaking reading and writing. Generally, second language curricula emphasize pronunciation in the first year of study as it introduces the target language's alphabets and sound system. However, pronunciation instruction rarely continues this focus in the higher level. Many researchers have explored the question of whether explicit instruction helps second language learners. In the end, there was a significant improvement in the intelligibility, and better ratings over time of comprehensibility and accent. They showed that 30 language learners could alter their pronunciation in a reading task (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003).

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### **3. Methodology**

Using a descriptive qualitative method in this study, 20 ESL students' of Okuapemman school pronunciation errors in consonant sounds were determined while reading a book. Qualitative research, according to Gregory et al (2005, p.2), is defined as research that uses methodologies that require the use of a sample or participant. After that, the researcher uses a descriptive account to observe. As Creswell (2014, p.183) says, qualitative methods are an observation process of understanding based on real methodological traditions in society and exploring human problems.

Okuapemman School's second-year ESL students, specifically from the General Arts students were chosen. The researcher picked form 2 students since form 1 students were unavailable at the time of the study, while form 3 students were busy studying for their final exam, making it harder to recruit them for the study. The participants were also

chosen from the General Arts department because it was the only department that was readily available at the time of the study.

There are four General Arts classes, and the researcher randomly selected five individuals from each class. The selection was done based on student's punctuality in class, punctuality was a necessary criterion to ensure that all the selected participants were presents when teachers introduced consonant sounds in class. In addition, the researcher used a form 2 English reading book where students were required to read one by one with emphasis on consonant sounds. The researcher employed a text for reading as an instrument, which contained consonant words, and continued to assess faults in student's pronouncing using a mobile phone to capture their sounds. When articulating some consonant sounds in the reading text, the participants in this study committed mistakes. This study focused entirely on consonant mispronunciation caused by the addition or omission of particular consonant sounds. One disadvantage of the study is that due to time constraints, the researcher was unable to record all consonant sound pronunciations. As a result, certain other characteristics of difficulty articulating consonant sounds may have been overlooked.

#### 4. Finding and discussion

The goal of this study was to learn more about the abilities of ESL students at Okuapemman schools. The sample size for this study was 20 students. Each student was required to read a passage from a form 2 English textbook. To obtain precise statistics, the students' pronunciations were recorded using a cell phone and played back numerous times. The pronunciations of the students were then converted into transcription using the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary as a reference. After converting the data to phonetic transcription, everything was thoroughly examined. It focuses solely on English consonant sounds. The errors were then identified and counted.

The table below shows the percentage of errors that were made by the selected ESL students in pronouncing consonant sound. NOTE: FO=Frequent Occurrence of the sound in the reading's= Number of students with incorrect pronunciation and NSC= Number of students with correct pronunciation.

**Table 1** Distribution of errors in consonant sounds articulation

SOUNDS	NSI	NSC
/θ/ voiceless dental fricative	12	8
/ð/ voiced dental fricative	14	6
/t/ voiceless alveolar plosive	2	18
/d/voiced alveolar plosive	20	20
/s/voiceless alveolar fricative	2	18
/z/ voiced alveolar fricative	15	5
/l/ voiced liquid	4	16
/r/voiced liquids	4	16
/f/ voiceless labiodental fricative	3	17
/v/ voiced labiodental fricative	3	17

After transcribing the data into phonetic transcription, it was analysed carefully. It is only focused on the English consonant sounds. Then the errors were marked and counted. Finally, the result of the counting shows that there are 10 pronunciation errors made by ESL students of Okuapemman schools. Those are /θ/, /ð/, /d/, /t/, /s/, /z/, /r/, /l/, /f/ and/ v/.

It can be realised on the table that students' errors in pronunciation certain sounds are higher as compared to others. Most of the students had difficulty in articulating the /ð/ voiced dental fricative. For example, in the word "they" they tended to pronounce it as /d əi :/ instead of /ðei/. In this case, the students completely substitute all of the features of sound [ð]. First, they substitute the state of the vocal cords, second, they construct alveolar sound, and for the manner of articulation the substitute it a stop sound. As a result, they produced a very distinct sound from /ð/ to /d/. in word initial position such as 'the' students substitute [ð/ for /d/ voiced alveolar plosive so instead of / ðə/ students

articulated /də/ and in word final position they substitute the sound for voiceless alveolar plosive as in the word 'booth' instead of /bu:ð/ the students articulate [boot].

Another sound with high error in articulation is the voiceless dental fricative. Students articulated /t/ voiceless alveolar plosive when the sound is used in word initial position. So in a word like 'thorough', students articulated it as /tri:/ instead of [θu:], in the word medial position too student replaced the sound /θ/ with voiceless labiodental fricative/f/ for instance in the word toothbrush [tu:θ.brʌʃ] students articulated it as [tu:f.brʌʃ], others too pronounced it as voiceless alveolar fricative/t/ depending on the word. for instance, in the word 'cathedral', [kəθi:dɪəl] students articulated it as [kəti:dɪəl] and in word final position students articulated it as voiceless labiodental fricative /f/ Such as/ truth/, this word is articulated by students as [helθ] instead of [helf]

Students also pronounced voiceless alveolar fricative/t/ as voiced alveolar fricative /d/. These two noises are articulated in the same way and in the same place. The state of the vocal cords distinguishes both sounds; [d] is a voiced sound, whereas [t] is a voiceless sound, which occurs most often in the word ending position when the word is in the 'ed' form. Students are frequently perplexed and pronounce it as /d/ rather than /t/. Students, for example, pronounced the word looked [lʊkt] as [lʊkd]. Students could articulate the voiced alveolar fricative/d/ in all locations, but they couldn't tell the difference between /d/ and /t/ when the word had 'ed' at the end.

Students also switched the use of the voiced alveolar fricative/z/ for voiceless alveolar fricative/s/. This usually happens when the word is in the final position. For instance, in the word 'his' and 'is' students articulated it as [his] and [is] instead of [hiz and [iz]. If not for this, students could have identified the correct articulation for both sounds.

Some of the students too interchanged the voiced liquids /r/ and /l/. These two sounds are both voiced it is only the place of articulation that changes. This error was mostly the case when we have the liquids coming right after the plosives /p/ and /b/ for instance in the word 'bring' [brɪŋ] students articulated it as [blɪŋ]. This error was made by few of the students.

Finally, a few students were unable to effectively articulate the voiced labiodental fricative/v/. When students swapped the sound /v/ for the sound /f/ at the word's last position, this happened. Because the sound [f] shares the same position and articulation of manner as labiodental fricative sounds, they only made one type of departure in this case: [v] was substituted by [f]. The state of the vocal cords distinguishes both sounds: [v] is a voiced sound, whereas [f] is a voiceless sound. Consider the words 'move' and 'give.' Instead of [mu:v] and [gɪv], students expressed it as [mu:f] and [gɪf].

The above errors could be due to a variety of sources, including L1 influence or interference. Interference was defined as "those instances of deviation from the norms of either language that occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their knowledge of more than one language" (Weinreich 1953, p.1 in Cook 1994, p.8). L1 interference is a substantial contributor to the mispronunciation of some of the study's target sounds. Consider the case of the voiced liquids/r/ and/l deviating from the norm. This occurs because in the Akan language there is free variation in /l/ and /r/.

There is indeed a carry-over of pronunciation regularities from L1 to L2 mostly at the phonological level. Majority of the students had difficulties producing the target consonant sounds correctly. Moreover, these findings on the deficiencies in the pronunciation of consonants among the learners present a part of the problem as existing studies on Ghanaian English have reported regarding the reduction of consonant clusters. In the case of /θ/ and /ð/, they are replaced by alveolar plosives /t, d/ in initial or medial position, but in final positions, dental fricatives may either be replaced by /f/ or dropped entirely. There are cases of affricated forms such as /dð/, /dθ/ in the English pronunciations of educated Ghanaians (Huber, 2008). According to Koranteng (2006), the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/are phonemic in Ghanaian English, however they swing in their use as Ghanaian speakers reflexively switch to /t/ and /d/ while speaking quickly (Koranteng 2006). In addition, due to a lack of exposure, students were unable to accurately express some of the words. Because the students have not been taught how to pronounce some of these words properly, they are unable to articulate them correctly. It could also be due to the nature of the language, as well as a lack of appropriate pronunciation instruction methods. This was the case of some sound which was articulated wrongly. For instance, the students articulated [hiz] as [his] because students have not been exposed to such occurrence. Overgeneralisation is also a contributing factor. Students overgeneralised some of the rules, hence articulated some of the sounds wrongly. For instance words with 'ed' at the end, most students assume that whenever 'ed' is added to a word it is pronounced as /d/voiceless alveolar fricative, therefore they articulate any word that has 'ed' at the end as /d/ for instance, in the word like 'looked' [lʊkt] students articulated it as [lʊkd] because of the 'ed; at the end. In relation to this issue, the rule states that in English, when /ed/ comes after a voiceless consonant, it is produced as /t/ (Roach, 2002). This overgeneralization could also be as results of students' background knowledge of language learners' mother tongue, thus a phonological rule that is absent in Akan

#### 4.1. Recommendation and Suggestions

According to the study's findings, ESL teachers should be educated on the proper ways to teach good pronunciation in order to assist ESL students in learning the correct pronunciation of words and to correct students when they pronounce words incorrectly when speaking. In addition, regular in-service training for ESL teachers in senior high schools should be organized to provide them with the necessary skills.

Finally, education stakeholders in the country should create well-resourced language laboratories for senior high schools so that students can practice phonetics and learn how to pronounce English words correctly.

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#### 5. Conclusion

In sum, the study has established that a high proportion of students mispronounced some consonant sounds, validating the fact that consonant mispronunciation persists among ESL students at Okuapemman School. This mispronunciation is caused by a number of factors, including the influence of ESL learners' L1 and mother tongue, overgeneralization, and a lack of exposure and thus, appropriate measures must be put in place to ensure that students are able to master the correct pronunciation of consonant sounds in the ESL classroom.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

##### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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