

**THE IMPACT OF PHONETIC ALPHABETS ON  
ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION:  
A CASE STUDY**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

It is evident that language as a primary device of communication requires a number of skills, which are just harmonized to cross-fertilize each other and make language comprehensible. Language can, of course, be communicated in spoken and written forms. In English, however, spoken and written forms differ in their basic shapes, functions, numbers and in the symbols employed. Both aspects represent a branch of language which by definition has its own distinctive principles and procedures of developing effective communication. In this sense, the phonetic alphabets and written-patterns cannot be alternative ways in dealing

with spoken or written skills in a non-phonetic language, like English, since there are different skills with different objectives. And to misuse them spells failure in their respective domains. In English, Phonetic skill and pronunciation are both viable, and neither needs to be used to the exclusion of the other if intelligible speech is required.

There is, however, a continuing research for empirical evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of the Phonetic Alphabets Approach (PAA) for teaching spoken language. Hanson (1983) claims that PAA as the most prudent way of teaching incorrect use of pronunciation. Hanson Pollack and Reese; also

cites McRenolds and Benett, and Gornett as confirming the use of PAA. Jonson (1980) reminds us that sound discrimination training demonstrates success in auditory discriminations. Orias (1986) also stressed the fruitful results of learning phonetics in helping "the learner hear, identify and pronounce clearly. A number of EFL experts also theoretically support this approach (Gimson; 1983, Ladefoged, 1975). Wilkins (1982) argues, "In order to be intelligible in speech, the learner has to master the phonetic characteristics of connected speech". King and Ladefoged (1975, 1965) have adopted a view similar to this. In this sense, the complete practical understanding of the structures of phonetics seems indispensable.

## 2. NEGLECTED SKILL

Phonetic alphabets have been considered as an

otiose skill since the beginning of formal programs of TEFL in Ethiopia. More than thirty books have been used as textbooks for teaching English since 1941. But none of them has dealt with phonetic lessons. Paradoxically, the learner, who has never had a course in phonetics, but presented with chains of written-patterns is expected to be linguistically fluent without having any opportunity to assimilate the written and spoken patterns. EFL authorities believe that the right way of presenting language skill in learning a foreign language is the practice of sounds first, then words and later sentences (Gimson, 1983). But the reality in EFL is different. Words and sentences through writing-patterns are imitated for internalising English pronunciation. This practice is considered as

defective (Coles, 1991).

As stated above, phonetic alphabets, a means to an end, predispose language for effective communication. In the English Foreign Language Education in Ethiopia, writing-patterns and word pronunciations by imitating teachers are highly emphasized as the most efficient and convenient means to cover all the language skills in the shortest time; disregarding the pedagogical purposes and functions of phonetic alphabets in developing linguistic fluency.

### 3. LINGUISTIC CONSTRAINTS

Language experts, however, maintain that the efficient use of phonation is necessary to meet the requirements of rapid articulated speech (Hanson, 1983) Linguistically, if the phonation is defective, pronunciation defects will result. In the light of such statements, the

neglect of phonetic alphabets might have affected adversely both the quality and quantity of EFL learning. Bennet (1968) pointed out that children with reading difficulties have pronunciation difficulties. This study also assumes that some EFL Ethiopian students who have learned the language for eight years have sluggish and partially intelligible articulation, mostly influenced by writing-patterns. It is very difficult to show examples out of context, but a distorted word or an error was detected when a learner failed to follow the patterns of standard pronunciation which causes misunderstanding or mispronunciation because of omission, substitution, distortion, which are the results of pronouncing words of silent letters. Reading orthographically and mispronouncing vowels, word stresses and clustered

letters are also the common causes of errors. The following few examples

illustrate what has been stated above.

Spelling	Correct Pronunciation	As Pronounced by the Students	%
contageous	kenteidges	kontagios*	90
fever	['five:]	[fiver]	88
purpose	['pe:pes]	[parpos*]	95
cat	['kact]	[kat*]	40
cut	['k't]	[kat*]	85
cart	['ka:t]	[kart*]	91
rectum	['rektθm]	[rektum*]	60
women	['wimen]	[women*]	95

\* Read /a/ as in father, /o/ as in ball, /e/ as in bell, /u/ as in bull.

The researcher maintains that the main problem which the majority of students face is the correct rendering of English sounds by means of English alphabets. Since language deficiency is positively correlated with poor articulation (Hanson, 1983), it could be a pronunciation influence on the language. It is, however, necessary that

students be mutually intelligible in the spoken language in order to avoid confusion. The attribution of phonetic alphabets as a viable force in acquiring English pronunciation for non-native English learners has been intellectually plausible in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). It seems, then, that failure to expose the EFL to phonetic

alphabets might be a reason for some Ethiopian students to have linguistic constraints.

#### 4. TEACHING LESSONS

Realizing the problem, the author resorted to the International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA), which focuses on phonemes, rather than on the conventional approaches to provide efficacious training to students, who had reading and pronunciation problems. Steps in developing teaching materials included Instructional Objectives specific to each lesson. After covering a chapter, in the discussions and exercises the learners were able to:

1. discriminate each phoneme in isolation and in contexts.
2. produce the given phoneme and grapheme correctly.
3. read words with speech-reading ability.

4. pronounce words using correct phonemes and graphemes in a manner of connected speech.

After completing a lesson, a learner was given a self testing work-sheet to determine if the essential objectives were met. With the exception of the individual evaluative tests, the learner had the option of working independently, or with other students. When feedback, or students' performance indicated a problem, additional exercises were set for the learners who lagged behind until the target lesson was done. The learner was responsible for repeating a phoneme was rated unsatisfactory.

#### 6. RESULTS

The phonetic lessons were effective in reducing perseveration and improving language performance, and in providing motivation in FEL learning with the

following pedagogical merits:

1. develops the basic sound discrimination skills.
2. develops the auditory discrimination.
3. improves the specific movement of articulations.
4. provides foundations for intelligible utterances.
5. helps self-correction and facilitates the possible level of competency in pronunciation.
6. accelerates the speech-reading ability.
7. develops coherent reading ability.

The above pedagogical merits are pronunciation properties which are just harmonized to cross fertilize each other to develop pronunciation fluency in English for effective communication. If one of these components

fails, the entire chain also fails to function. These pronunciation properties should be correct, at least at word levels, to fulfil the purpose: intelligible English pronunciation. It can be concluded that learning by using phonetic descriptions is an acceptable educational alternative. Other essential ingredients of communicative competence, in general, are equally applicable in English learning/teaching processes. Since the EFL learner comes to school without the knowledge of the basic speech sounds, he has to get the skill in order to use the language properly.

## 7. CONCLUSION

EFL program in Ethiopia has in the past been seriously neglecting the general perspectives, and pronunciation linked demands that communicative

competence places on phonetic alphabets. The article further maintains that phonetic lessons deserve a place in the TEFL program with a constant focus on developing the purposes it serves. It could serve the dual purpose of teaching EFL

learner precise pronunciation and concomitantly stimulate related language skills all are interrelated. It would, therefore, be appropriate for teachers to explore the advantage of this auspicious approach.

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