

The Phonetic Variation of English Vowels of Engineering Students: A Linguistic Study

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ABSTRACT

In India speaking skills are neglected by non-native speakers; as a result, they failed to master the correct accent which is essential for their career. Keeping in view, the importance of English language, Indian Universities have set up Phonetics of English in all the engineering colleges and facilitated students to overcome MTI and turn out to be mutually intelligible with neutralized accent. It also identified the gap of speaking skills and assisted students to get exposed to all the aspects of Phonetics in practical Laboratory sessions. The present paper is a research which studies the phonetic variation of English vowels as spoken by Telugu speakers. The methodology is based on collecting data which is supplemented by the field notes and obtained by means of a questionnaire- written and spoken skills. Audio recording was taken and transcribed for words, sentences and minimal pairs. It includes zonal and gender variation. Moreover, it is qualitative and quantitative analysis of Phonetic variation. Subsequently, a comparison is made based on the hypotheses whether it is proved or not. To obtain the accurate results, sociolinguistic factors are employed in the study. Statistically significant variations are found in which it discusses the results to find the solution for better improvement.

Key words: MTI, Mutually Intelligible, Neutralization, Variation, Sociolinguistic factors.

Date of Submission: 27-11-2019

Date Of Acceptance: 12-12-2019

I. INTRODUCTION

The Phonetic variation of non-native speakers is a regular aspect found in Hyderabad for a range of reason primarily the MTI. They perform poorly when compared to native accent. It is difficult for the students to achieve a standard accent, which is assumed to be GIE. The reason behind the variation is mainly due to sociolinguistic aspects which interfere with pronunciation and accent. To achieve the accent of target language, Indian Universities have introduced the language to study Phonetics in undergraduate level to master it and help students get their accent neutralized.

Research Problem:

The research found out that, there could be some problems with the informants, few of them are listed below:

- It was noticed that, there was more than one variant of English vowels of the informants.
- It is true that though they studied basics of Phonetics at plus two level and can identify the sounds but they were not taught neutralization.
- It is observed that the informants did not focus on learning pronunciation correctly and found negligent to learn and retain information of the concepts.
- It highlights the reason for not setting an effort in mastering the same.

Observations from pilot study:

The observations from the pilot study show that:

- Deviation of sounds from native language to target language was found i.e. Mother Tongue Interference.
- There is lack of accuracy and clarity in pronunciation and
- The articulation of sounds went by the spelling but not by the sound.

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To discuss the reasons of absence of basic spoken skills and the intervention of sociolinguistic factors.
2. To identify and explain the quality (three term label) of vowels and different variants of English vowels of the informants.
3. To help them overcome difficulty levels and acquire appropriate pronunciation by being mutually intelligible.
4. To facilitate informants to reduce the variants of English vowels and train to get hold of neutralized accent.

Need for the study

In India, English language is studied as a second language from decades and it is considered a global language. It has much prominence and acts as a bridge among bilinguals in the Indian society, there is need to communicate, in order to communicate learners have to perform well in language skills since English helps in their job search and their career. Students in the process of getting recruited /going abroad are tested in many areas via English language. They have to take the test, a series of tests is conducted and their performance acts as major part, here students' proficiency in accuracy, fluency, accent is tested. To lead a better future, learners should have stock of language skills and perform excellently. Thus, the need arises to probe the different variants and study the impediments in language skills and help them acquire proficiency, improve and overcome the situations so that they may compete in the job market. And further they can attempt tests such as GRE., TOFEL, IELTS...etc., for all the above mentioned reasons, it is felt that there is need to do research.

Scope and Limitations of the study

The scope of the study is limited to English vowels only but not all the sounds of English. It aspires to look into the errors made by the informants of engineering and find out the reasons. The present study is restricted to one college from Hyderabad but not the entire state. The sample is taken from the engineering college affiliated to Osmania University, Hyderabad from the informants who are pursuing first year Bachelor of Engineering from different branches coming from rural and urban background with Telugu/English as their medium of instruction and they would be the second language speakers. Technical English and English Language Laboratory is included in their curriculum of first year of their course in the University.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses underlying the research are

- There is manifestation of MTI in informants' speech and difficulty observed with reference to Monophthongs and Diphthongs.
- There is lack of mutual intelligibility and comprehensibility besides ambiguity in mastery over the language.
- Region, Caste and Age doesn't show any difference in variation of sounds.
- The gender variation shows difference in written test than articulation of sounds.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An attempt has been made on this work to give an account of Vowel Variation of engineering students on the use of pronunciation of English language. A greater amount of work has been

done by many researchers with profound analysis. Earlier researchers and scholars worked on the linguistic materials, focused on variation of vowel sounds.

In recent years a large number of studies have been published on Indian English some of these like Kachru (1962: 64) concentrated mainly on the sociolinguistic aspect of Indian English, like that Bansal (1966) dealt with questions of the acceptability and its intelligibility its validity as independent variant etc.

Few Indian Scholars made research on English vowels and in their findings they said that informants were unintelligible in their speech, found MTI in articulation of sounds and diphthongs were monophthongized. It was also found that, there were reading errors, back vowels problems, a vowel variation between R.P. and GIE and due to lack of training, articulation made by the spelling but not by the sound. It is true that It occurs over the period of time but in this research the researcher says it is also connected with sociolinguistic factors.

In works of William Labov It says studying speech quantitatively is important because for one sound if we get different variables we need to justify in conclusion then have to look at the social background. Labov used statistical techniques for quantitative treatment of the data; he is treated a leader in the field. He has taken the local population and has taken several locales on the Island with various occupations and different ethnic groups, broad age groups, various demographic categories. He recorded each informant's speech in a semi-structured interview. He worked on a small island off the New England coast (called Martha's Vineyard) demonstrated the existence of systematic difference between speakers in their use of certain linguistic variables after which he worked in a very different community in New York. He made observations across two generations. He observed changes for vowels and diphthongs.

C.K. Thomas (1958:191-241) says that there is **regional Phonetic variation** within American states. He found out Monophthongal and Diphthongal variation. Scholars such as Chomsky and William Labov made research on variation of sounds (in the form of words and constructions) in America and made some conclusions on how sociolinguistic factors (**region, social status, Gender, occupation and Age**) affects the informants from various places of America. Labov worked both in rural and urban communities to find out the variables. He made some personal inventions of the variables.

The concept of General Indian English

R.P. is available as a model for Indian learners and they have the strong influence of their habits when they learn R.P., they also have regional features in the English spoken by Indians. The result is that the speech of Indians rendered as unintelligible to every Indian and to native speakers. There are varieties of English spoken in India according to their mother tongue and therefore had many varieties of English. According to Balasubramanian, he says that if we put all the common phonological features of Indian varieties we get some common features, and if all the varieties of English put them together and remove some gross regional features a variety of English will emerge that he called General Indian English (GIE). It is also meant for certain variety of English spoken by educated Indians. It is free from regional features. It is descriptive and prescriptive model which is prescribed by CIEFEL to Indian speakers to imitate as a model of spoken English in India to become free from the features of some Indian varieties.

The vowel system of General Indian English (GIE)

Monophthongs / i:, ɪ, e:, ɛ, æ, ə, ʌ:, ɒ, ɔ:, ʊ, u: /

Diphthongs: /aɪ, ɔɛ, aʊ, ɪə, eə, ʊə/

The vowel system of R.P.

Monophthongs / i:, ɪ, e, æ, ʌ, ɜ:, ə, ʌ:, ɒ, ɔ:, ʊ, u: /

Diphthongs: /eɪ, aɪ, ɔɪ, əʊ, aʊ, ɪə, eə, ʊə/

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed for the research is to test the speakers' range of variants in articulation of English vowels with reference to sociolinguistic factors, accuracy, and problems in mastering the language. To explore this aspect a pilot study was conducted in an engineering college affiliated to Osmania University. The procedure followed for the research is as follows:

- A pilot study was conducted in an engineering college which is affiliated to Osmania University.
- The sample is collected from an engineering college, which has a composition of students that belong to seven zones of Telangana State. The analysis will be made on the qualitative and quantitative approach.
- A test was conducted to the informants. A questionnaire was distributed for written test which consisted of theory questions of Introduction to English Phonetics and test in spoken skills for English vowels in the form of audio recording which included word list, words in connected speech and minimal pairs (of all the twenty vowels). The data collected from the informants contained Sociolinguistic factors.
- Field notes will be supplemented by the researcher in which the data collected would be presented.

- The data would be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively after the findings of the research which would give insights into informants' mastery over the language and suggests a practical solution.

Research Tools:

The tools planned for the research are:

- Questionnaire-This section consists of two types; first is written test which includes twenty questions based on introduction to phonetics of English and spoken skills test which consists of word list, words in isolation and connected speech (sentences) and minimal pairs.
- Spoken skills test is conducted by taking informants speech that is recordings of word list, words in connected speech (sentences) and minimal pairs in the form of Audio.
- Sociolinguistic aspects are collected from the informants to provide evidence for the reasons behind the informants' variants of English vowels.

Description of the sample:

The sample selected for the research is as follows:

- Informants are selected from an engineering college affiliated to Osmania University, Hyderabad who are pursuing first year B.E. (Bachelor of Engineering) from different branches
- Informants are a composition of seven zones of Telangana State, from each zone two informants- one girl and a boy is selected for the study, and
- the sample size is twelve which covers the entire state of Telangana
- The study wishes to analyze the data qualitatively and quantitatively

Data Collection

The data collected for the research initially is primary data and it is a pilot study in semester one of B.E. (Bachelor of Engineering) first year informants. The data collected from them is discussed below

- The data collected for the study is from B.E. first year informants from different branches of an engineering college.
- The sample collected for the study is of twenty five informants but finally twelve informants were selected from seven zones of Telangana State. From each zone two informants were taken for the study one female and male informant.
- The information gathered from the informants was during their break time, they were given the questionnaire for written test along with their personal information. Spoken skills test was also taken by recording their speech. The recorded

test included a word list, words in isolation, connected speech and minimal pairs.

- The recorded speech was transcribed and entered on excel sheet along with the written test scores.
- Sociolinguistic factors were employed to compare informants' details with phonetic variables.

Analysis of the research

The data collected from the informants is analyzed as the first part of the research.

- The primary data of the informants are Age, caste, medium studied in school and intermediate, district, zone, gender, mother tongue, education of the parents, occupation, Income, idea of Phonetics of English in school and college, and whether they have any problem with their pronunciation and accent. Are they trying to overcome MTI and interested to learn, the language used for social interaction?...etc.
- Twelve informants of B.E. first year from different branches of the same college were selected for the study. In a pilot study they were tested of the familiarity of the concept of Phonetics of English. The test consisted of written test, spoken skills test which recorded the speech of informants' of word list, words in connected speech and minimal pairs and tried comparing with sociolinguistic factors. The oral speech of the informants was transcribed to get the output of the research and all the details of the written test, audio recordings and sociolinguistic factors are uploaded on excel sheet for comparison. The result of the first part of the research is discussed briefly in conclusion.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is assessed that the informants have not retained the concepts taught at the Intermediate level. However, there is a problem with their articulation and are not mutually intelligible and MTI is found in their accent. They were not taught neutralization except the basics. The errors are similar though they come from different backgrounds. The male informants performed better than female informants in written test. From the audio recordings, male and female informants have similar kind of variants for English vowels.

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