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INTELLIGIBILITY AND COMPREHENSIBILITY ISSUES AMONG PAKISTANI SPEAKERS OF
ENGLISH

GHULAMULLAH¹, Dr. MOHD HILMI BIN HAMZAH²

¹Ph. D Candidate, School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia
Email: gmullah@yahoo.co.uk

²Senior Lecturer, School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia
Email: hilmihamzah@uum.edu.my



GHULAMULLAH

ABSTRACT

English language has occupied the status as an international language. Globally, all members of society use English in every field of life. However, non-native English speakers face intelligibility and comprehensibility problems. This article is intended to probe factors that cause intelligibility and comprehensibility issues especially in the Pakistani context. This study also proposes some recommendations that address these issues in order to acquire the desired level of intelligibility and comprehensibility achievement.

Key words: Intelligibility, comprehensibility, pronunciation, mother tongue, World Englishes

1. Introduction

English has entered the world of Englishes that crosses the boundaries of English native countries (Hardt & Neri, 2000). Now, it is the language of science, technology, education, judiciary, army, electronic and print media in 70 countries around the world (Kachru, 1998). Albeit, many years of studying English non-native English speakers face communication problems, particularly in colloquial conversation (Jabeen, 2013). Therefore, globally, consultants, engineers, designers, solicitors, judiciaries, legislators, dealers, distributors, exporters, writers, artists, educators, learners, etc. may face some difficulties that may be due to unintelligible and incomprehensible communication (Al Hosni, 2014; Burnett, 1998; Paakki, 2013; Riemer, 2007).

Similarly, like other non-native learners of English, Pakistani learners also have unintelligibility and comprehensibility issues. Most of the educated members of the society are incapable to communicate in English language. Some writers (e.g., Rahman, 2014; Sheikh, 2012) claim that Pakistan has its own variety of English, i.e., Pakistani English (PE) that can fulfill the need of the Pakistani society. However, most of the experts do not support this idea as they think that PE is not only unintelligible to native English speakers but also a retorted shape of English (Shahzada, et al. 2012; Hussain, 2004, as cited in Hashmi, 2012). Thus, PE speakers may not be able to understand native English speakers and vice versa (Bughio, 2014).

Intelligibility is the ability of a speaker to be understood by a listener (Kenworthy, 1988), while comprehensibility is attributed to a listener in a sense of giving meaning to words (Munro, 2008). Smith and

Nelson (1985) argue that intelligibility is a mutual interaction between speaker and listener while comprehensibility is the ability of a listener in recognizing the words uttered by a speaker (Derwing, 2010).

Many enterprises such as Punjab Education and English Language Initiative (PEELI) (British Council, 2014) (OICD, 2015) Pakistan English Language Teachers Association (PELTA), (Alvi, 2010; Coleman, 2010) English for Teaching: Teaching for English (ETTE), (<http://spelt.org.pk/>) The Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT) have made some attempts to address the issues in unintelligible and incomprehensible communications but the target of communicative competence is still too far away. These issues may possibly be due to some reasons such as segmental and suprasegmental difference between Pakistani and English, untrained English teachers, incompetent teachers, unavailability of materials for teaching pronunciation and washback effects of Pakistani examination systems (Nawab, 2012; Warsi, 2004). These issues can be removed through, for example, proper teaching of pronunciation in English language subjects, explicit teaching of segmental and suprasegmental features of English language, inclusion of oral and aural skills in English language in a summative assessment plan, etc. (Abshire, 2006; Pullen & Justice, 2003; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). The current study will be an influential step to go forward for further studies to resolve the issues of intelligibility and and comprehensibility in Pakistani contest.

2.1. Global Issues Regarding Intelligibility and Comprehensibility

English language has become a lingua franca. Non-nonnative speakers of English are increasing day by day; communication in English language has now become a need of hour. However, native-like pronunciation is no longer a target due to its variations in world Englishes. Now, debates about intelligibility and comprehensibility have been given growing attention (e.g., Wang, 2013; Chatterjee & Jain, 2011). Speakers of different cultures in different contexts face problems regarding intelligibility and comprehensibility. Cunningham (1990) conducted a study on the learners of Midwest suburban metropolitan area in USA and found some intelligibility and comprehensibility problems among learners. Saito (2007 & 2011) carries out two researches to remove the problems about eight segments /æ,f,v,μ,ð,w,l,ô/ which hampered the adult Japanese English users' intelligibility and comprehensibility while staying in USA.

Papachristou (2011) postulates that the Greek and English vowels are complicated for the learners. Koike (2014) too searches intelligibility problems and frames out a comprehensive course to improve intelligibility in English communication in Japan. In Iran, Rahbar, Jahandar, and Khodabandehlou (2013) investigate the issues related to the comprehensibility of the students of a university in colloquial communication and suggest that suprasegmental instructions may improve comprehensibility. Gordon, Darcy, and Ewert (2013) suggest that students in USA face comprehensibility problems at a university level and these researchers try to sort out some specific problems the sounds /i, ɪ, æ, ε/ by their experimentation. Wang (2013) expresses the issues about intelligibility and comprehensibility in Taiwan and suggests the communicative approach for improvement in communication. Hassan (2014), Yalun (2002) and Bardakçi (2015) point out some intelligibility and comprehensibility issues faced by non-native English speakers in Sudan, Thailand and Turkey, respectively.

2.2. Issues Regarding Intelligibility and Comprehensibility in Pakistan

Like the global phenomenon, Pakistan cannot be exempted from the problems of intelligibility and comprehensibility. As Kachru (1998) contests, Pakistan is the former colony of British Empires and included in the outer circle of seventy countries of the English empire. Consequently, in Pakistan, every student from grade one to graduation is bound to study English language (Rahman, 2010). Officials in all the major fields of the country use English as an official source of communication. But the problems concerning unintelligible and incomprehensible speech always interrupted in the desired communication. Although Sheikh (2012) defends the replacement of /ɜ, e, ə and eɪ/ with /ʌ, æ, i, e:/ correspondingly in the articulation of the stated sounds in Pakistani English (PE), this exchange still creates unintelligible and incomprehensible communication (Malghani & Bano, 2014).

Additionally, Pakistan inherits 79 local languages along with their dialects in which Bangali, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Urdu, Siraiki and Balochi are the major languages (Rahman, 2003; 2010). Malghani and Bano (2014) point out that these languages, being the mother tongue or the first language (L1) of the population of

the country, influence the learning of a second language (L2). Thus, the variances of articulation of sounds between L1 and L2 create unintelligibility and incomprehensibility issues. Their study indicates that the learners whose mother tongue is Balochi, Brahvi and Lasi may face intelligible and comprehensible complications because of the effects of L1. Rehman and Bukhari (2012) provide evidence that the speakers with Pashto as mother tongue face problems when pronouncing the five English consonants sounds, i.e., /f, v, θ, ð, and ʒ/, which may be due to L1 influences. Khan and Qadir (2012) carry out their study about Pakistani Phari speakers who are unable to make difference between four consonants of English /θ, ð, w, ʒ/ and Phari. Consequently, all these incongruities make PE speakers unintelligible and incomprehensible.

However, Hussain (as cited in Hashmi, 2012) harshly censures PE users who are unaware of the English rules of grammar, syntax, semantics, phonetic and phonology; this unawareness causes unintelligible statements, unfamiliar structures and unfitting questionings. Jabeen (2013) points out that PE speakers are unable to speak and listen properly even after 16 years of education in which English has been studied as a compulsory subject. Rahman (2005) suggests that only 2% of Pakistanis are able to deliver their message through spoken English.

2.2.1. Segmental and Suprasegmental Differences between L1 and L2

Internationally, many scholars such as Bardakçi (2015), Kanoksilapatham (2014), Bian (2013), Ahmad (2011) and Ghatage (2013) provide the evidence that mother tongue influences English language pronunciation. In Pakistan, there are 79 languages that are too different from English in terms of sounds, articulation and context (Rahman, 2003). For example, Urdu is the national language in Pakistan (Khalique, 2006) in spite of being the mother tongue of only 6% of the total population of Pakistan.

Urdu has 37 consonants and 10 vowels (Kachru, 2003; Khan, 1997) while English possessed 20 vowels and 24 consonants, and most Urdu users cannot recognize the discrepancy between some of the segmental and suprasegmental aspects of Urdu and English. In Urdu, some phonemes such as /ص/، /س، ث/ (Ali & Ijaz, 2009, p. 16) comprise only one corresponding item sound /s/ in English but these Urdu phonemes are produced with different rate of blockage of air between teeth. Thus, the hissing sounds are overlooked from Pakistani speakers by exchanging them with /ص، ث، س/. Nevertheless, the sound /س/ can be equal of sound /s/ in English apparently. Likewise, Urdu phonemes; /ظ، ذ، ڙ، ض/ have the same problems due to their resemblance with English Phoneme /z/; these Urdu phonemes are produced in different places of vocal tract and by the different manners of articulations. Some other major Pakistani languages such as Bengali, Punjabi, Pashto and Sindhi, are also different from English in terms of articulation and manners (Khalique, 2006).

Rehman, et al. (2012) find out that Pakistani Pashto speakers are unable to pronounce English consonants sounds /f, v, θ, ð, and ʒ/ due their mother tongue effect because Pashto does not have sounds which are similar to these English consonant sounds. Similarly, Khan and Qadir (2012) indicate that the Pakistani Phari speakers mispronounce the sounds /θ, ð, w, and ʒ/ due to their mother tongue effects. Malghani and Bano (2014) indicate that the Pakistani Balochi, Brahvi and Lasi speakers face problems while learning L2 because of L1 transfer effects. Moreover, because the source of derivation of many of the local Pakistani languages are Arabic and Persian. And these languages are too different form English regarding stress and intonation. Thus, Pakistani mispronounce English words because of these differences. For example, (Alharbi, 2009) Arabic words are not syllable time-stressed but English words are time-stressed with variation in level of pitch and time. The factor of discrepancy between local Pakistani languages and English language is may be a hurdle in the path of intelligibility and comprehensibility.

2.2.2. The Neglected Status of Teaching of Pronunciation in Pakistan

The government of Pakistan implemented English as a mandatory subject from the first grade to graduation since 1989 (Rao & Ahmad, 2013; Rahman, 2010) but the teaching of pronunciation of English is not part of this compulsion. No degree is accepted until the English subject is passed. Rao and Ahmad (2013) point out that majority of the graduates from public institutions are unable to communicate in English particularly in oral and aural skills. All these public educational institutions fulfill the need of education about 70% of the total population of the country. English is taught as a compulsory subject from level one to graduation but without teaching of pronunciation.

There is another network of English medium private schools and colleges for elite that are run by non-government organizations (NGOs), armed forces, the federal and provincial government and other state-controlled institutions (Rahman, 2010). These institutions are autonomous bodies, which follow the syllabus made by themselves and run O-level and A-level programs. Although the educated elite from these institutions are proficient in speaking and listening of English (Rahman, 2005) they only consist of two 2% of the educated population of the country. These institutions, whether the syllabus imposed by the government or by the foreign stakeholders or framed by themselves, have no room for teaching of pronunciation. So, inability of educated class in speaking and listening skills leads to dilemma of unintelligibility and incomprehensibility (Warsi, 2004).

2.2.3. Incompetent English Teachers

Stronge (2007) expresses that there are three seminal characteristics of an effective teacher. Firstly, a teacher must be competent in his/her subject and subject-area of degrees with methodological support. So, a question arises whether a Pakistani English Language teacher (ELT) achieves this goal. The study carried out by Bashiruddin and Qayyum (2014) indicates that 89% of ELT teachers in Pakistan were unqualified in their related subject. Conversely, only 11% have got degree of Master of Arts (MA) in English literature but not in teaching of English. In Pakistan, it is assumed that holders of MA in English literature degrees are competent to teach English language. Moreover, they are not trained any way to teach English or to teach in general.

Secondly, teacher should be competent in verbal skill that he should be intelligible and comprehensible for his/her students. Gul and Aziz (2015) present the results of their study that English teachers in the districts of Punjab, i.e., Lahore, Rawalpindi and Mianwali, were deficient in oral communication due to inefficiency in grammar and vocabulary. Nawab (2012) severely criticizes the bad condition of English teachers in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province of Pakistan and states that there are untrained and incompetent English teachers like the other teachers of other regions of Pakistan. This entire situation complicates the target intelligibility and comprehensibility in Pakistan.

Thirdly, a competent teacher should be certified in his relevant subject. However, Pakistani ELT teachers do not fulfill this requirement. As stated above, Pakistani English teachers have no relevant degrees in teaching English, specifically in the teaching of pronunciation (Nawab, 2012; Bashiruddin & Qayyum, 2014). Mahmood and Ghani (2012) emphasize that, in Pakistan, ELT educators are not properly qualified mainly in pronunciation and there is a calamitous need of teachers who are equipped with innovative methods, advanced approaches of instruction and the right attitude. It can be supposed that majority of teachers are not capable of teaching of English language (Shamim, 2011).

2.2.4. Lack of Material for Teaching of English Pronunciation

The books for public schools are published by government and are free of cost. Private schools, mostly, recommend books published by foreign publishers such as Oxford University Press (OUP), Cambridge University Press (CUP), Routledge, and Prentice Hall etc. These books are too expensive and inaccessible for the local users. Government-published books do not have components for teaching pronunciation. Recently in 2009, in some English books, vowels and consonant sounds are mentioned but they are not taught any way. Some of foreign books have some portion of speaking and listening skills but practically, they are ignored and not assessed in summative assessments.

Teevno (2011) claims that the libraries of the province of Sindh Pakistan do not have ELT materials. Overall, the existing primers are insufficient (Nawab, 2012; Warsi, 2004) which do not satisfy students' linguistic needs of pronunciation. Warsi (2004) further maintains that ELT books should be published according to learners' need but this is not the case in Pakistan. Rahman (2014) indicates that books are parroted instead of understanding and there is no place for oral communication skills.

Mansoor, (2005) outlines the representation of the ELT situation in Pakistan that teaching of pronunciation of English language is supposed to be acquired eventually via the study of English literature. Surely, language can be taught through English literature but with adopting the prescribed proper methodology which determined by experts in ELT domain. Hişmanoğlu (2005) expresses that teaching of literature paybacks in teaching of language but with "pedagogically-designed appropriate materials", definite

objectives and qualified English teachers. Thus, proper material and its utilization can enhance the intelligibility and comprehensibility of non-native learners.

2.2.5. Washback Effect of Assessment

Pakistani examination system is the most influential cause for the marginalizing the teaching of pronunciation that leads to intelligibility and comprehensibility problems. The learners' achievement is evaluated only on the basis of the marks obtained in examinations. Spoken and listening skills are not assessed in these exams. Thus, teaching of pronunciation is totally ignored.

Ahmad and Rao (2012) find out the undesirable condition of English language teaching in Pakistan through their study. They admit that the English language teachers are affected by the examination system. The accuracy of language is meant only in writing because all the modules are assessed in writing with the goal to achieve high marks in tests. Speaking and listening skills are not assessed in assessment format. Chandio et al. (2013) put that examination system promotes rote learning. So, teachers are forced to show their proficiency in summative exams. Moreover, there are no grades for oral and aural skills. Khattak and Abbasi (2014) depict the real picture of English language teaching in Pakistan that no new method can be implemented to promote English language teaching because of firm grip of examination system over all the educational systems.

Rahman, (2014) illustrates the Pakistani examination system for language assessment in this way; "In Pakistani colleges, English language teaching is enslaved by the learners' short-term goal of passing the examinations and obtaining the certificate or the degree for which they have enrolled" (p. 212). Khattak and Abbasi (2014) endorse untrustworthiness of examination system which is only performance markers. Shamim (2011) also confirms that Pakistani assessment process emphasizes only on memorizing of the content of the subject. This fact is really a great hindrance to attain the required communicative targets.

Putting into nutshell, it can be said that teaching and learning English pronunciation is severely affected due to the phonetic and phonological differences between L1 and L2, the disregarded status of teaching of pronunciation in Pakistan, incompetent English teachers, deficiency of material for teaching of English pronunciation and washback effects of assessment. All these said factors may be responsible for intelligibility and comprehensibility issues faced by Pakistani English users.

Recommendations

To lessen the effects of mother tongue transfer effects, explicit instruction (a metalevel approach where a speaker consciously follows some linguistic rules in separate forms with practice) should be promoted. Many researchers such as Abshire (2006), Pullen and Justice (2003) and Yopp and Yopp(2000) recommend that explicit instruction can be a very effective approach to solve intelligibility and comprehensibility problems.

Government, institutions and stakeholders should pay growing attention to the teaching pronunciation. The educational policy should include the teaching pronunciation as a compulsory portion of teaching of English at every level.

The employers must recruit the English teachers who have relevant degrees. The English teachers should be trained in new teaching of methodology. Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, the Silent way and Communicative Language Teaching method (Howlader, 2011) should be introduced to the English teachers. There should be workshops, seminars, spoken English courses and refresher courses to enhance the potential of English teachers.

Government must take steps to provide authentic books on teaching and learning pronunciation. The book writers should be given incentive on writing teaching pronunciation books. The foreign books should be published locally with the permission their publishers and writers so that their price could be reasonable according to local purchasing power.

The foremost step to promote teaching and learning pronunciation for enhancement of oral and aural skills, the examination system should be modified in such way that rote learning should be discouraged and the dependence on course books can be prevented. Both the speaking and listening skills should be included in

all kind of formative and summative assessment and tests. The tests should be made according to validity and reliability rules.

Conclusion

The problems regarding unintelligibility and incomprehensibility do not exist only in Pakistan but it is an international phenomenon. The causes of this problem is related to the differences between L1 and L2 articulation systems, incompetence of English teachers, lack of material for teaching of English pronunciation and washback effects of examinations. All these hurdles can be removed by taking firm steps in changing of teaching pronunciation pedagogy, by organizing the training of English teachers, provision of teaching English material for teaching of English pronunciation. The washback effects is the most influential factor that hinder intelligibility and comprehensibility. The pronunciation must be assessed in all kind of formative and summative evaluation.

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