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PRONUNCIATION ERRORS IN ENGLISH AMONG UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

English is a crucial medium of instruction and professional communication in India, especially for engineering students who aspire to global employability. Despite years of academic exposure, many Indian undergraduates struggle with accurate English pronunciation. This paper investigates the common pronunciation errors observed among engineering students in India, examines the underlying linguistic causes, and suggests pedagogical strategies to address these issues. Drawing from phonetic studies, regional linguistic influences, and educational practices, this paper highlights how mother tongue - - interference, lack of corrective phonetic instruction, and non-native stress patterns contribute to mispronunciations. Remedies for improved pedagogy and corrective tools are also discussed.

Key Words: Pronunciation, Pedagogy, Vowel, Diphthongs, Intonation.

INTRODUCTION

English has become the lingua franca of science, engineering, and global communication. In India, it is both a medium of instruction in engineering colleges and a skill of employability. Despite this, a large number of undergraduate engineering students exhibit persistent mispronunciations, which affect their intelligibility and communicative competence in professional career along with personal growth. If the students can speak English fluently that can help them to easily communicate and also explore their ideas.

Pronunciation errors may not hinder academic performance but can significantly impair professional communication, especially in interviews, presentations, and collaborative environments. Speaking English well also helps students to access up-to-date information in fields including science, technology and health and so on (Richard, 2008). This paper aims to analyze causes and suggest remedies for these pronunciation errors, with a specific focus on engineering students across linguistic regions in India.

Factors affecting pronunciation errors:

Mother tongue Interference

Mother tongue influence is one of the primary causes of pronunciation deviations in Indian learners of English. English in India is generally learned as a second language, after a native language) such as Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, or Bengali. The influence of L1 phonological systems on English is well-documented (Sriprabha, 2015; Sharma, 2018). Indian English itself has regional phonetic variants, which are influenced by the speaker's mother tongue and schooling background.

Non-native speakers of English often perceive and produce sounds of English like the sounds of their own mother tongue, though they are not quite the same. It is difficult for them to pronounce some English sounds because, they do not exist in their mother tongue.

Ignorance of listening and speaking skills

Another factor for the difficulty in pronunciation of English is ignoring listening and speaking skills. The recent theories of Second Language teaching learning have laid stress on the importance of the listening and speaking skills. But for a long time, English language teaching in India has focused on the Reading and Writing Skills to the exclusion of the 'oral and aural'

skills.

The learners are not aware of difference of vowel and consonant sound, this factor makes them confused in pronouncing words

Vowel Errors

Indian learners often substitute diphthongs with long monophthongs. For example:

- /eɪ/ → [e:]: “name” is pronounced as [ne:m]
- /əʊ/ → [o:]: “go” becomes [go:]

Another frequent issue is incorrect use of the unstressed syllables. Many Indian students stress all syllables equally, leading to unnatural rhythm. For instance: “memory” → [ˈmɛməri] instead of [ˈmɛməri]

This stems from the syllable-timed nature of most Indian languages versus the stress-timed nature of English (Jain & Sharma, 2022).

Consonant Substitutions

/θ/ and /ð/ (voiceless and voiced dental fricatives) are commonly replaced by /t/ and /d/, respectively:

- “think” → “tink”
- “that” → “dat”

This substitution occurs because Indian languages lack dental fricatives in their phonemic inventories (Sriprabha, 2015).

/v/ and /w/ confusion is another prevalent issue:

- “very” → “wery”
- “west” → “vest”

This arises in speakers of languages like Bengali or Hindi, which either lack the /v/ sound or do not distinguish it clearly from /w/ (Moorthy, 2016).

Final Consonant Clusters

Indian languages often avoid consonant clusters, especially at the end of words. Engineering students may thus drop or simplify clusters:

- “asked” → “ask”
- “world” → “worl”

Word Stress:

English uses variable stress (e.g., 'PHO-to-graph vs pho-TOG-ra-pher). Indian learners often fail to shift stress appropriately.

Intonation:

Indian English tends to be flatter or uses a rising tone across sentences, which may sound unnatural to native speakers.

For example, declarative sentences may end with a rising tone, making them sound like questions.

Several studies have examined the spoken English proficiency of Indian college students. For example, a 2015 survey by Aspiring Minds found that only 0.9% of engineering graduates had C2-level English proficiency, while over 50% were below the B1 level, particularly struggling with pronunciation (Times of India, 2015).

Learners can make different types of grammar mistakes in English by omitting auxiliaries, words or placing the incorrect form of the verb when identifying tenses. Also, they apply grammar rules that are correct in their L1 but incorrect in L2.

Spelling Pronunciation

English orthography is highly non-phonetic. Indian learners, trained through reading-based methods, tend to pronounce words based on spelling:

- “often” → ['ɒftən] (instead of ['ɒfn])
- “salmon” → ['salmən] (instead of ['sæmən])
- “colonel” → ['kernal] (instead of ['k])

Engineering syllabi rarely include phonetics as a module. Students may never learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) or receive feedback on stress, rhythm, or intonation.

Limited Exposure and Practice

In many regions, English is learned in the classroom but not used actively outside it. This limits opportunities for natural acquisition and self-monitoring of speech.

Remedies for minimize the errors

Universities should include phonetics and pronunciation labs in their communication skills modules. Teaching articulation, voicing, stress, and intonation systematically can yield noticeable improvement.

Rising intonation at the end of yes/no questions helps indicate that a response is expected. Falling intonation in information questions aids in making the questions clear and complete. Using punctuation with pauses helps make your speech sound more natural and easier to follow.

Use of Technology

Technology can be used to learn the correct pronunciation in this tech era. ICT tools such as dictionary with audio, videos of conversation, listening speech of native English speaker. A teacher can use or suggest various websites for practicing of proper pronunciation. Spoken English be encouraged and promoted and the sound patterns which are likely to be confused and faltered be identified and drilled. The learners should be able to practice these sound patterns over and over again using a model voice to emulate. These activities are expected to be done in digital language labs.

Minimal Pair Drills

Drills focusing on confusing pairs help to develop fine-grained phonemic awareness. like:

“ship”vs “sheep”

“rat” vs “rate”

“this” vs “these”

“lead” (to guide) vs “lead”(a metal)

It can be helpful to understand the difference of pronunciation of homophones and homonyms too.

Regional Accent Awareness

Students should be made aware that regional influences are natural but can be managed. Accent neutrality is not about erasing identity but improving intelligibility (Crystal, 2003).

Corrective Feedback in Classrooms

Teachers must actively correct mispronunciations rather than ignore them. Peer correction and audio recordings can also be effective tools.

Conclusion

English pronunciation continues to be a challenge for Indian undergraduate engineering students. Their errors stem from systemic linguistic interference, educational gaps, and limited exposure. However, these issues are not insurmountable. With the integration of targeted pronunciation training, use of modern ICT tools, and an emphasis on intelligibility over native-like perfection, students can greatly improve their spoken English. Improving pronunciation is not just a linguistic concern but a professional necessity for engineering graduates in India, especially those seeking employment in multinational environments. Future studies could focus on developing tailored phonetic modules for different linguistic regions and evaluating the long-term effects of phonetic interventions on students' employability.

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