

Speaking for effective communication

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Abstract

Speaking skill is a crucial tool for effective communication. The right delivery of the message requires correct pronunciation of words and appropriate use of stress and intonation for effective communication to take place. In speaking, we create sounds using various parts of our body such as the lungs, vocal tract, vocal cords, tongue, teeth, and lips. This paper discusses the classification of English sounds into consonants and vowels and examines important clues on syllable, stress and intonation. This is strictly descriptive. It concludes that right pronunciation of words and appropriate use of stress and intonation play a significant role in interpreting meaning of utterances. However, incorrect pronunciation of words, wrong use of stress and intonation are major causes of poor communication.

Introduction

Communication is technically defined as the process by which information is enclosed in a package and transported from the sender to the receiver through a medium. Communication can be in various forms such as written, verbal (oral), electronics and non-verbal. Oral and written forms of communication are the most common and frequently used forms of communication. Oral communication is the transfer of information from a sender to a receiver by means of verbal medium. Oral communication can be achieved through speeches, discussion, presentation etc. In other words, a major element of oral communication is word.

To achieve effective oral communication, it is necessary to ensure that the words spoken are pronounced appropriately and delivered with the correct stress and in the right pitch and tone. Vennapoosa, (2014) opines that clarity, brevity and precision are key features of effective oral communication skill, and to convey the right message to the receiver complicated sentence structure and jargons should be avoided. In other words, the words used should be pronounced and stressed properly, sentences should be simple and unnecessary words should be avoided so as not to convey a meaning that is different from the intended meaning.

In light of the above position, this paper looks at the role of speech in oral communication and the organs of the human body that are involved in speech production. It further examines the correct pronunciation of consonant and vowel sounds and presents important clues on the use of stress and intonation patterns in the English Language.

Speech and its production in oral communication

The main purpose of speaking is to convey meaningful ideas to the listener. To do this, the listener should be able to interpret the meaning of the spoken sounds. One way of doing this is by providing a coding mechanism with set of rules that will enable the listener to interpret the meaning of the speech. The tool used by human beings to code information is language. Each language has its own set of rules which needs to be learnt in order for anyone to be able to communicate in that language. As such, the English language has its set of rules which users of the language need to learn to be able to communicate effectively in it.

Speaking, therefore, can be seen as an interactive process that involves producing meaningful messages that is verbal. In other words, speaking is the delivery of language through the mouth. While speech can be seen as a flow of meaningful utterances generally made up of sounds. Sounds are the smallest pieces of language which can be separately identified and distinguished by human beings. The production of speech has to do with the interaction of various organs of the human body. The organs include: brains, the lungs, the larynx (the voice box), the organs of the mouth such as the tongue, teeth, lips, hard and soft palate, the pharynx (the throat) and nasal region. A part of the speech apparatus is 'stream of air' breathed out from the lungs. As this air passes through the narrow space in the human throat and mouth, sounds are produced through the modification of the shape of the passage.

Classification of English sounds

As letters are used in writing, so symbols are used to represent speech sounds. That is, words can be written the way they are produced, this is known as phonetic transcription. Speech sounds are generally divided according to the way they are made and the organs with which they are made. The English sounds are generally divided into consonants and vowels.

Consonants

Consonants are sounds produced with interference or obstruction in the flow of air through the speech tract or organ of speech. Consonants can be also divided into plosives, fricatives, affricates, approximants and nasals.

i.) Plosives: In plosives the breath is totally blocked at some point in the mouth by the lips or tip of the tongue or even the back of the tongues and then released with a slight explosion to form plosives in English language. They are: /p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/.

ii) Fricatives: Fricatives are consonants produced by a partial closure of the air passage. The lungs push air through a narrow opening where it causes friction of various kinds producing these sounds: /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /h/.

iii) Affricates: Affricates share the characteristics of plosives and fricatives. In affricates, the air is trapped and it is released with some friction. The release of air during the production of affricates is gradual unlike in plosives. They are: /tʃ/, /dʒ/.

iv) Nasals: Nasals are produced by blocking the oral passage and allowing air to escape through the nose. They are: /m/, /n/, /ŋ/.

v) Approximants: Approximants are sounds produced by bringing one articulator in the vocal tract close to another without causing friction. They include: /y/, /w/.

We note that the consonants could be describe by the feature, voicing. Voicing refers to the articulatory process in which the vocal cords vibrate. It is categorized into two, voiced and voiceless, hence voiced and voiceless consonants. A voiceless sound is one in which the vocal cords do not vibrate and a voiced sound is one in which they do. The voiceless sounds are produced with only the breath, for example; /p/ and /t/. While the voiced sounds are produced with breath and voice, /b/ and /d/. Therefore, /p/ and /t/ are voiceless while /b/ and /d/ are voiced plosives.

Vowels

Vowels are produced without obstruction in the flow of air through the speech tract. All vowel sounds are voiced. English sounds can occur as pure vowels or diphthongs:

Pure vowels: Pure vowels are called pure because the tongue remains in one position from the beginning to the end of the pronunciation of the sound. The pure vowels are: /i:/, /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ɔ:/, /ɒ:/, /u:/, /ʊ/, /æ/, /ʌ/, /ə/, /ə:/.

Diphthongs: Diphthong is a succession of two vowels. A diphthong forms a glide within one syllable; the tongue moves from one position to another. A diphthong begins as one vowel and ends up as another. In phonetic transcription, diphthongs are represented by two symbols. The diphthongs are: /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ɔɪ/, /ʊə/, /əʊ/, /eə/, /ɪə/.

Stress, syllable and intonation

Correct production of sounds makes our speech intelligible. However, stress and intonation also play important roles in making our communication successful. They enhance the understanding of our speech.

Stress

Stress can be described as the degree of force with which a syllable is uttered. A syllable that is said to be stressed is that which involves greater breath effort relative to the surrounding syllables. So the listener perceives the stressed syllables louder than others. For example, in the word ‘kettle’ /ketl/, the first part is said with greater force than the second part. Also, in the word ‘about’, the second part is said with greater force than the first.

The English language is a stressed-timed language. The pronunciation of words is governed by stress. Stress operates primarily on the level of the syllable. So for a better understanding of stress, there is the need to look at the meaning of syllable.

Syllables

A syllable in the English language is that part of a word which is said with one breath or pulse. It usually contains one vowel sound and one or more consonant sounds. For example, the word 'baby' /berɪ/ has two syllables /beɪ/ and /bɪ/. A word may consist of one or more syllables. Let us look at the following examples:

One syllables: egg, cloth, tall, come, joy, chair, good, man
Two syllables: a/long, book/shop, tea/cher, stu/dent, fa/mous
Three syllables: po/si/tive, a/tten/tion, a/ccoun/tant, ma/na/ger
More than three syllables: pho/to/gra/phy, es/ta/blish/ment, e/xa/mi/na/tion.

The English language differs from most African languages in the area of stress. In the English language only one syllable in each word is stressed but in most Nigerian languages, such as Urhobo, Igbo, Itsekiri, Yoruba, Benin, and so on, every syllable is stressed. It is that syllable that is stressed that carries the meaning of the word. So the position of stress in a word determines the meaning of that word. Also note that the sign (ˈ) is used to indicate stress on the syllable that bears it.

It is important to note that stress can play a derivational role. For example, the word 'convict', with stress, can become a noun or a verb:

ˈConvict 'a person sentenced to a jail term'
Conˈvict 'the act of sentencing somebody to jail'

Intonation

Intonation is another feature of speech which affects the understanding of a message. Intonation is the variation in the pitch of the voice in connected speech. When we speak, the pitch of our voice is continuously changing. When the pitch rises, the intonation rises, and when it falls, the intonation falls. In communication, our mood to our listener or to the topic of discussion is shown in the type of intonation we use. For example, if we are happy, angry, impatient, impolite or polite it is revealed through the intonation pattern we use. The change in the pitch of our voice while we speak makes speech interesting and also gives our listener a better understanding of us and our message.

There are two basic patterns of intonation: the falling tune and the rising tune. However, there may be a combination of both tunes in long sentences. To indicate the tune, the arrow sign will be used: for the ↘ falling tune ↗ and for the rising tune.

The falling tune

The falling tune is used in statements, WH-questions, commands, instructions and exclamations. The examples below represent these respectively:

- 1) Grace is a beautiful girl ↘
- 2) Who is at home? ↘
- 3) Go there at once. ↘
- 4) Bathe the child before I arrive. ↘
- 5) Thank God you are safe! ↘

The rising tune

The rising tune is used for questions that require yes or no answers, polite requests, information seeking tag questions, to express denial and for incomplete sentences. These are exemplified respectively below:

- 6) Have you eaten? ↗
- 7) Lend me your pen, please. ↗
- 8) My book is with you, isn't it? ↗
- 9) It wasn't James. ↗
- 10) I did my best... ↗

It is worthy of note that the two tunes could be combined especially in longer sentences as the example below shows:

- 11) If he comes early, ↘ we will go together. ↗

Conclusion

Every speaker may have a purpose for speaking but not all listeners are able get the message the speaker passes across. This breakdown in communication this paper has argued is caused mainly by inappropriate pronunciation of words and wrong use of stress and intonation on the part of the speaker. Each language has its sets of rules and any learner that wants to use that language has to learn the rules to be able to communicate in that language. This paper acknowledges the vital role of speaking skill in effective communication and has provided some of the rules that count on pronunciation of English words and use of stress and intonation for the purpose of contributing to improved communication in the Nigerian society where the English language is officially prominent.

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