

Challenges in Pronouncing Words that Consist of Multiple Consonant Clusters: A study based on ESL learners of NAITA, Kinniya, Sri Lanka

A. F. Abdul Halik¹ & S. Umashankar²

¹English Unit, T/Mu/Al Hilal Central College, Mutur, Sri Lanka

²Department of English Language Teaching, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

¹abdulhalik@gmail.com, ²umashankars@esn.ac.lk

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of identifying the challenges encountered by the English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), Kinniya in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters. It has been observed that learners encounter various pronunciation problems and difficulties in speaking and loud reading. In this study, hundred ESL learners of NAITA, Kinniya were randomly selected as sample population for investigation. The primary data were collected using quantitative method, and an oral pronunciation test and a questionnaire were employed as the research instruments in this study. The instruments enabled the researcher to identify the learners' challenges and errors in pronouncing words consisting of multiple consonant clusters and factors behind their challenges and difficulties. Accordingly, the findings show that most number of learners encountered difficulties and made errors in pronouncing words containing consonant clusters. Moreover, the opinion survey revealed that the learners show lack of interest in learning pronunciation rule and many other factors also affect their pronunciation. These pronunciation challenges and difficulties can be overcome through implementing pronunciation as a separate component like grammar, writing etc. in the ESL curriculum of NAITA.

Keywords: *Consonant Clusters, English as a Second Language, National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority, Pronunciation*

1. Introduction

There is a large group of students who follow Vocational Training Courses (VTC) and continue their tertiary education at National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), established under the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training, Sri Lanka, in which they learn English as a second language (ESL) since it has been a compulsory course in the curriculum of NAITA.

In English language teaching (ELT), there are four major language aspects involving: structure, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling. These aspects are taught in order to develop the learners' skills in language communication. To understand and communicate the meaning of a language, pronunciation is the main aspect of speaking, especially in the English Language. Arteaga (2000) argues that the purpose of learning a second/foreign language is to communicate, and if the pronunciation is too far off, the hearer will not understand the language no matter how good grammar and how correct words we use.

Similarly, Garrigues (1999) explains that the foundation of an effective spoken communication is good pronunciation. It is recognized as a fundamental skill that students should acquire primarily because it can affect the accuracy and comprehension by the listener. Therefore, more emphasis has to be given for speaking and pronunciation skills to develop the speaking ability with good pronunciation of ESL learners in Sri Lanka, but very less focus has been given for speaking and pronunciation skills in the ESL classes.

Likewise, consonant clusters were a significant element in pronunciation, in which NAITA learners were observed to have found difficulties when they try to pronounce the words with initial, middle and final clusters. As a result, errors were observed among the learners during classroom practices in their loud reading and speaking.

Some errors were also observed during classroom teaching in the use of consonant clusters. Ruzkina et al (2016) report that consonant clusters are very rare in Tamil language, and there is no word with initial consonant cluster in Tamil language. As a result, certain words in English language were hard to pronounce or sometimes were mispronounced by the ESL learners. For instance: /θri:/ as /θiri:/, /spi'sɪfɪk/ as /ɪspi'sɪfɪk/, /sku:l/ as /ɪsku:l/ and /stɑ:t/ as /ɪstɑ:t/.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The following objectives are addressed in this study.

- To identify the errors made by the ESL learners of NAITA in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters
- To investigate the factors that cause difficulties among ESL learners of NAITA in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the problem and findings in classroom teaching/learning process, the following questions are formulated in this study. They are as follow.

- Do the learners find difficulties in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters?

- What causes the difficulties in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters?

2. Literature Review

This section presents the review of other relevant studies. There are a huge number of local and international studies on English pronunciation and challenges in pronunciation since it has been a common problem among the large number of ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

In this sense, according to the review of the other sources, Ruzkina et al (2016) investigated pronunciation problems among Tamil speaking undergraduates of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL). In this study, Ruzkina et al (2016) conclude that some errors were identified in consonant and vowel sounds, initial consonant cluster and complex words. This study reveals that in ESL learning of undergraduate students at SEUSL, several students encounter difficulties in pronunciation. Pronouncing consonant cluster is one of the pronunciation errors made by many ESL learners.

Further, another research was conducted related to the pronunciation problems and difficulties faced by grade 11 students in the Ampara District by Ismail and Ilmudeen (2011). In this study, Ismail and Ilmudeen (2011) identified challenges and difficulties in consonant and vowel sounds as this research was limited with segmental sounds. Ismail and Ilmudeen (2011) further concluded that 85% of students found difficulties in pronunciation due to mother tongue interference. Interference of Tamil language highly influenced in acquisition of pronunciation. Some of the causes for pronunciation difficulties found in their study: mother tongue interference, unaware of the knowledge of the importance of phonology, lack of knowledge in English phonetic script, inappropriate teacher's guidance and lack of practice. According to the findings-based conclusion of this study, it reveals that students who learn English in school contexts face challenges in pronunciation when they speak and read aloud. They commit a number of pronunciation errors and mistakes. As a result of mother tongue interference, several students face difficulties in pronouncing words that consist of consonant clusters.

Similarly, words consisting of initial and final consonant clusters were observed to be commonly difficult ones to pronounce for the ESL learners of NAITA. This seems to be a common problem among many number of ESL learners in Sri Lanka. In this perspective, Ruzkina et al (2016) report that challenges encountered by the Tamil speakers was in the usage of consonant cluster. Consonant clusters are very rare in Tamil language and can never be word-initial. As a result, certain words in Second Language (L2) are hard to pronounce or

sometimes mispronounced such as /θri:/ as /θiri:/, /'klɪnɪk/ as /'kɪlɪnɪk/ and /'krɪmɪn(ə)l/ as /'kɪrɪmɪn(ə)l/. As reported above, the ESL learners of NAITA were also Tamil speaking students. Therefore, they are most likely to encounter problems in pronouncing words consisting of initial and final consonant clusters.

Moreover, Hago & Khan (2015) point out that clusters contain sounds that are not in the Arabic consonant inventory or have different pronunciations; for example, /sp/, /gr/, /spl/, and /str/. These clusters are problematic for the Arabic English learners of English. According to the findings of the above study, a large number of Arabic ESL learners confront difficulties in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters, since there are no consonant clusters in their own mother tongue. However, Hide (2007) points out that consonant clusters are very commonly used in English words. It is controversial that ESL/EFL learners make pronunciation errors in the use of consonant clusters due to their L1 interference.

Based on the review of the previous studies, English language learners commit pronunciation errors and mistakes when they pronounce the words that consist of consonant clusters. This is a universal problem among most of the ESL/EFL learners around the world. The primary factor identified in the previous studies and learners' performance in the classroom was mother tongue interference. In some languages, there are rare clusters whereas English language consists of initial, middle and final clusters. When the learners attempt to pronounce English words based on the existing knowledge of pronunciation rule in mother tongue, they mispronounce the words. There is no initial cluster rules in Tamil whereas there are initial cluster rules in English. For instance, the word **'Study'** is pronounced as /istudy/.

It is notable that Tamil speaking ESL learners pronounce the word **'study'** due to the influence of pronunciation rule of Tamil language.

Therefore, Zhang & Yin (2009) conclude that a significant number of Chinese students who learn English tend to have difficulty with English sounds since they are deeply influenced by similar Chinese sounds. When Chinese and English languages are compared, there are contrast in pronunciation rules and dissimilarities between both languages.

3. Methodology

This study was a descriptive survey research and mixed approach was chosen in this study. Further, random sampling technique was employed to select the sample population of the study. As a result, 100 students were selected from different trades/courses: Information Communication Technology (ICT), Computer Graphic Designer (CGD), Computer Hardware

Technician (CHT) and Nursing Assistant for the investigation. Two basic research instruments were used in this study for collecting primary data, namely: an oral pronunciation test and a questionnaire.

Further, this study was qualitative when identifying the correct statements of the oral pronunciation test and quantitative when analyzing the questionnaire. The oral pronunciation test consists of ten set of words that contains consonant clusters. Each set of words consists of four words. Moreover, the questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part was intended for collecting the background information of the participants and the second part was intended for collecting opinions regarding pronunciation and factors that affect learners' pronunciation development.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the data analysis and discussion of the findings. First, the major findings and discussion of the oral pronunciation is presented. Second, the major findings and discussion of the questionnaire is presented.

4.1 Difficulties in Pronouncing Words Containing Consonant Clusters

Ten set of words (40 words) related to consonant clusters were given in the test, in which 43 of the participants (86%) mispronounced the words consisting of consonant clusters. 7 of the participants (14%) on the other hand correctly pronounced all the 30 words given. According to the collected data, out of 43 participants who mispronounced the words, 15 of the participants (30%) incorrectly pronounced all the 40 words. 13 of the participants (26%) incorrectly pronounced between 1 – 10 words and another 13 of the participants (26%) incorrectly pronounced between 11 – 20 words. Moreover, 17 of the participants (34%) incorrectly pronounced between 21 – 30 words.

Most of the participants faced difficulties in pronouncing the following words; /θɛfts/, /dɛskz/, /dʌstz/, /sku:l/, /smɔ:l/, /ɑ:sks/, /'spɛʃəl/ and /'drɑ:ftsmən/. These words focused on initial, middle and final clusters. The following Figure. 1 shows the responses given with regard to difficulties in pronouncing words consisting consonant clusters.

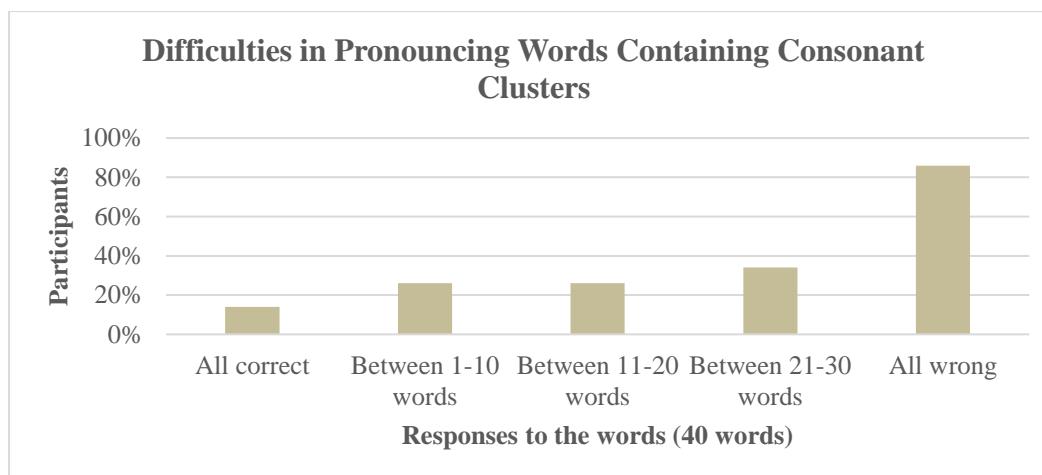


Figure. 1 (Difficulties in Pronouncing Words Containing Consonant Clusters)

According to the data analysis of the oral test with regard to pronouncing words consisting of consonant cluster, problems and difficulties were encountered in pronouncing words that consist of initial, middle and final consonant clusters. 86% of the participants struggled to pronounce the words with clusters and made errors. For instance, in initial consonant clusters, **/s/ was pronounced as /is/ by majority of the participants, like study as /istʌdi/, school as /isku:l/, start as /istɑ:(r)t/, special as /ispef(ə)l/ and stop as /istɒp/.** According to participants' oral test performance and opinion survey, The findings is clear that these words were mispronounced as there is no initial consonant clusters in any Tamil words. Moreover, participants were unaware of the phonetic rule.

Similarly, as far as the middle and final clusters are concerned, some set of words based on middle and final clusters were given to read aloud. Some of the words mispronounced by majority of the participants were: **interpret - /ɪn'tɜ:.prɪt/, strategy - /'stræt.ə.dʒi/, thefts - /θɛfts/, desks - /desks/, dusts - /dʌsts/, texts - /texts/, draftsman - 'drɑ:ftsmən/, swings - /swɪŋz/, linguistics - /lɪŋ'gwɪs.tɪks/ and constituent - /kən'stɪtj.u.ənt/.** When the participants were assigned to read out these words, they struggled very much. The opinion survey shows that lack of loud reading and speaking practice is the key factor for mispronouncing these words.

As reviewed in Literature survey, Ruzkina et al (2016) point out that consonant clusters in Tamil Language are very rare. As a result, Tamil speaking ESL learners mispronounce the words which consist of initial consonant clusters due to the interference of mother tongue. For instance, the words /θri:/, /'klɪmɪk/ and /sku:l/ were pronounced as /three/, /cilinic/ and /school/. Similarly, the participants in the current study incorrectly pronounced the words with initial, middle or final consonant clusters.

Moreover, according to Hago & Khan (2015), they conducted a study on consonant cluster problems of Arabic speaking English learners. Due to dissimilar consonant clusters between Arabic and English, the learners encountered problems to pronounce certain words which consist of /sp/, /gr/, /spl/, and /str/ clusters. As Hago & Khan (2015) concluded, there are fewer similarities between Tamil and English languages. The phonetic, morphological, syntactic system of both languages are different. According to previous studies on consonant clusters, due to interference of L1, Tamil speaking ESL learners commit errors when pronouncing words that consist of consonant clusters.

4.2 Factors affecting learners' pronunciation development

This close-ended question was set based on the factors that affect NAITA students' pronunciation learning and development. According to the participants' response, some significant factors were chosen. The findings obviously reveal that 22% of the participants had selected interference of L1; 26% of the participants had selected 'lack of pronunciation practice'; 30% of the participants had selected 'insufficient knowledge of phonetic rule'; 22% of the participants had selected 'learners' age'.

The following Figure. 2 shows the factors that affect learners' pronunciation learning and development.

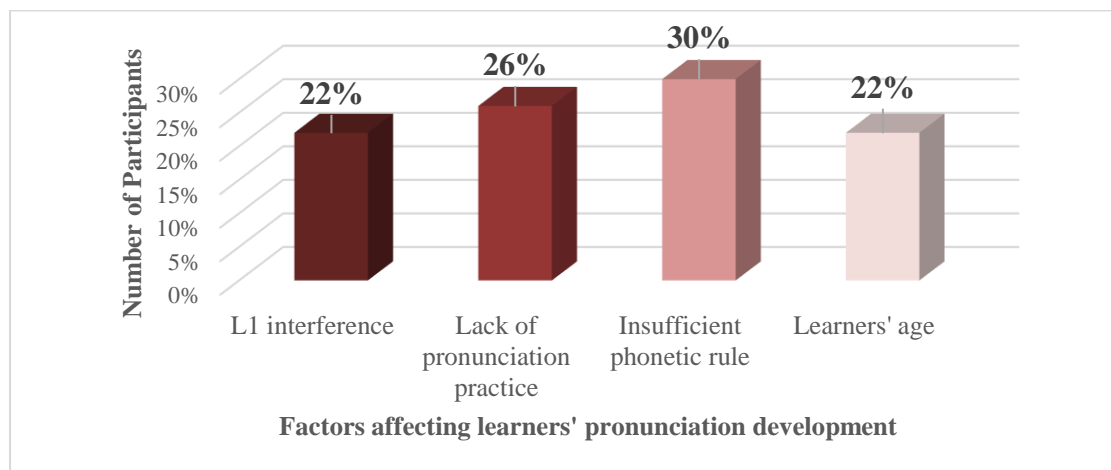


Figure. 2 (Factors affecting learners' pronunciation)

According to the findings with regard to factors affecting learners' pronunciation, consonant cluster is one of the main features of pronunciation. Therefore, participants' opinions were gathered regarding factors that affect learners' pronunciation development. The findings obviously reveal that due to insufficient knowledge of phonetic rule in English, many number of participants faced difficulties and challenges in producing accurate pronunciation when they read aloud and speak out. As far as ESL teaching/learning in schools in Sri Lanka is concerned,

either pronunciation rules are deductively taught or corrected. Accordingly, in a study on ESL learners' difficulties in using stress and intonation, Niruba & Halik (2021) conclude that according to the ESL context in Sri Lanka, very little focus has been given to speaking and pronunciation in ESL classes. In a formal education context at schools, ESL teachers do not allocate time and periods to teach pronunciation and practice pronunciation rules.

Similarly, it was identified based on classroom observation, participants' performance in the test and opinion survey that the learners do not have adequate knowledge about consonant clusters and pronunciation rule in English language. As a result, majority of the participants had made errors in pronouncing words that consist of consonant clusters. Challenges were also identified when reading initial, middle and final consonant cluster words. It is notable that learners' age and practice play a significant role in L2 learning and development. Particularly, adult ESL/EFL learners find it difficult to grasp natural pronunciation and lack of practice is the barrier to improve pronunciation skills. Learners at NAITA are adult ESL learners. Therefore, they encountered difficulties and committed errors when pronouncing consonant cluster words.

4.5 Participants' Response to Yes-No Questions

Rest of the questions in the questionnaire were yes-no questions. The fifth question focuses on teaching pronunciation as a separate component in ESL classes. The participants were asked whether their teachers at school taught pronunciation as a separate part in a lesson. According to the responses to the question, 42 of the participants (84%) responded 'no' whereas 8 of the participants (16%) responded 'yes'. Similarly, the sixth question was with regard to correcting pronunciation errors. The participants were asked whether their teachers corrected pronunciation errors in their loud reading and speaking activities. According to the responses to the question, 38 of the participants (76%) responded 'no' whereas 12 of the participants (24%) responded 'yes'.

Further, the seventh question focuses on challenges in pronouncing complex words and words consisting of consonant clusters. The participants were asked whether they encounter challenges in pronouncing complex words and words consisting of consonant clusters in their loud reading. According to the responses given, 37 of the participants (74%) responded 'yes' whereas 13 of the participants (26%) responded 'no'. The eighth question concentrates on concerning pronunciation errors in loud reading and speaking, in which the participants were asked whether they concern about the pronunciation errors in their loud reading and speaking

practice. According to the responses given, 45 of the participants (90%) responded 'no' whereas 5 of the participants (10%) responded 'yes'.

The ninth question was set regarding spending time to learn pronunciation, in which the participants were asked whether they spend time at home for learning pronunciation. According to the responses to the question, 30 of the participants (60%) responded 'no' whereas 20 of the participants (40%) responded 'yes'. The last question focuses on loud reading. In the last question, the participants were asked whether loud reading practice can help them to correct their pronunciation errors. According to the responses given, 39 of the participants (78%) responded 'yes'. On the other hand, 11 of the participants (22%) responded 'no'.

The above opinion survey is obvious that many number of ESL learners at NAITA faced challenges in pronouncing certain words, particularly words consisting of consonant clusters. Insufficient pronunciation rule was the primary factors for barriers in pronouncing words with consonant clusters since pronunciation rule is not taught as if other components of English language in most of the ESL lessons. According to participants' response, majority of teachers do not correct learners' pronunciation errors. This is the main reason for finding challenges in pronouncing words containing consonant clusters.

Therefore, the findings of the previous studies and current study clearly depicts that the ESL/EFL learners encounter difficulties and challenges in pronouncing words containing consonant clusters. It has been a pronunciation error among most of the ESL learners.

5. Conclusions

According to the findings, this study can be concluded that 43 participants out of 50 encountered difficulties in pronouncing words consisting of consonant clusters, particularly initial and final clusters. The results of the findings show that some words with initial consonant clusters were pronounced like /sku:l/ as /isku:l/, /stɑ:(r)t/ as /ista:(r)t/, /speʃ(ə)l/ as /ispeʃ(ə)l/ and /stɒp/ as /istɒp/. And also, as far as middle and final clusters are concerned, in certain words such as /θefts/, /dʌsts/, /'drɑ:ftsmən/ and /swɪŋz/, the participants faced difficulties to pronounce them correctly.

Moreover, the findings are apparent based on the opinion survey that various factors affect learners' pronunciation development. Pronunciation rule is not taught in ESL classes. Therefore, learners' errors in pronunciation are not corrected in their loud reading and speaking performance, and most of the teachers and learners do not consider the pronunciation errors like some other components in English language. Most of the participants encountered

difficulties in pronouncing words with consonant clusters. Loud reading practice could be one of the techniques to improve learners' pronunciation.

5.1 Recommendations

The problem of difficulties and challenges faced by the ESL learners in pronouncing words containing consonant clusters can be overcome and their pronunciation skills could be improved when the followings measures are implemented.

- Pronunciation rules can be deductively taught to improve the pronunciation.
- Various pronunciation practices with drilling can be used in classroom.
- Pronunciation errors can be corrected as correcting other components like writing and other activities.
- Loud reading practice can be emphasized in classroom.

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