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An Analysis of the Problems and Causes of Errors in Spoken English: A Case Study of the Female Engineering Students in the Age Group of 18-21 Years

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand and analyze the problems and errors made by the students whose L1 is Hindi and other Indian languages and trying to learn English as a second language in India. The errors made during the test are categorized and analyzed on the basis of a score sheet and PRAAT software. It is realized that the proficiency and effective communication can be developed among the learners if they are instructed correctly.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

With the herald of globalisation and world becoming more of a global village, English language has become a potent tool of socio-cultural and

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knowledge exchange as well as an effective soft skill of enviable market value. In the realm of business communication, correct and effective spoken English acquires an even greater significance, for it provides an almost universal medium to express properly the knowledge and the experience, which for the lack of words, may remain in oblivion. This paper aims to describe the most common errors committed in spoken English, to trace the genesis of such errors and suggest some practical pedagogical ways to deal with it.

2.0 PRONUNCIATION

The first major challenge before a language teacher invariably is to inculcate proper pronunciation in students. While conducting this study, it was found that most of the students/second language learners tend to make some common mistakes in speaking English words correctly and, owing to erroneous grammatical understanding, correct English sentences as well. For our purposes, we have taken into account three major features, which largely contribute to the right pronunciation of word. These are *aspiration*, *r-deletion* and *gliding errors*. In English, we usually aspirate the sound represented by *p*, *t* and *k* (*voiceless consonants*), when they initiate the word (that is, release these sounds with an extra “puff” or “h” sound). This is called aspiration. However this rule of phonetics is often violated by students and most of the students fail to aspirate the word. As per the rule of R-deletion, *r* sound occurring in the final position in a word is deleted while articulating words. Gliding refers to the shifting/gliding from one vowel sound to another during the articulation of word. Again these rules are generally flouted by second language learners. As proposed by Selinker (1972), these errors occur due to either the interlingual error or the language transfer. Sometime these errors are described as ‘performance errors’. The current study is conducted on six students who are trying to learn English as a second language in a class for communication building.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology was interview based. Students were asked to produce some English words and sentences and their speeches were recorded with the help of a sound recorder. Their performance was measured with a score sheet on the basis of following criteria:-

There were ten words and ten sentences together and therefore the total score was given as twenty. If the pronunciation was correct then the subject was given the score 1 and if it was incorrect a score 0 was given subsequently. The study is cross sectional because the students were recorded at the same point of time and learning the same course. The number of total subjects was six. Two tests were conducted –one for words in isolation and other for the usage of same words in a sentence. This was done to ascertain whether students can pronounce the word correctly-both in isolation and in sentence.

The sentences for the three features are listed as below.

FEATURE CHECK	ID	EXEMPLARY SENTENCES
Aspiration of the voiceless consonants at the word's initial position	1	I am flying a kite.
	2	Give me that pen.
	3	What is the time?
	4	This is cool.
R- deletion at word final	5	He is my teacher.

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position	6	The doctor is in.
	7	Rose is a lovely flower.
Gliding	8	I am going to station.
	9	Are you sure?
	10	Stay away.

3.1. Profile

The profile of the subjects can be seen in the Appendix 1.

3.2 Test

Once the recording was complete subjects were given a unique id no. such as S1-S6.

Score for words in isolation

FEATU RES age→	S 1 (18.2)	S2 (19.3)	S3 (20. 5)	S4 (21. 0)	S5 (20. 7)	S6 (19.5)
Aspirati on (total 4)	1	1	1	0	0	1
r- deletion (total 3)	3	1	2	1	1	0
Gliding (total 3)	0	0	0	0	0	0

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Score for sentences

FEATURE	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
S age→	(18.2)	(19.3)	(20.5)	(21.0)	(20.7)	(19.5)
Aspiration (total 4)	0	1	1	0	0	1
r-deletion (total 3)	1	0	1	0	0	0
Gliding (total 3)	0	0	0	0	0	0

4.0 ANALYSIS

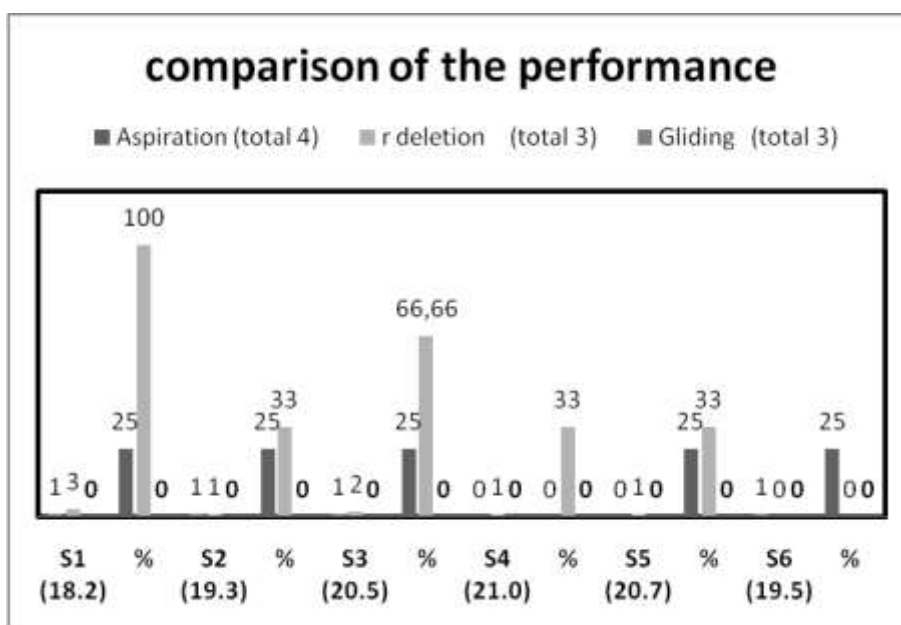


Figure 1 WORD LEVEL

On the basis of our observations following conclusions can be drawn:-

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- ✓ Aspiration word initially was 66.66% for at least one subject (S3) in this study.
- ✓ R-deletion at the word final position was 100% for one subject and 25% in average.
- ✓ Subjects performed poorly in test for 'Gliding'.

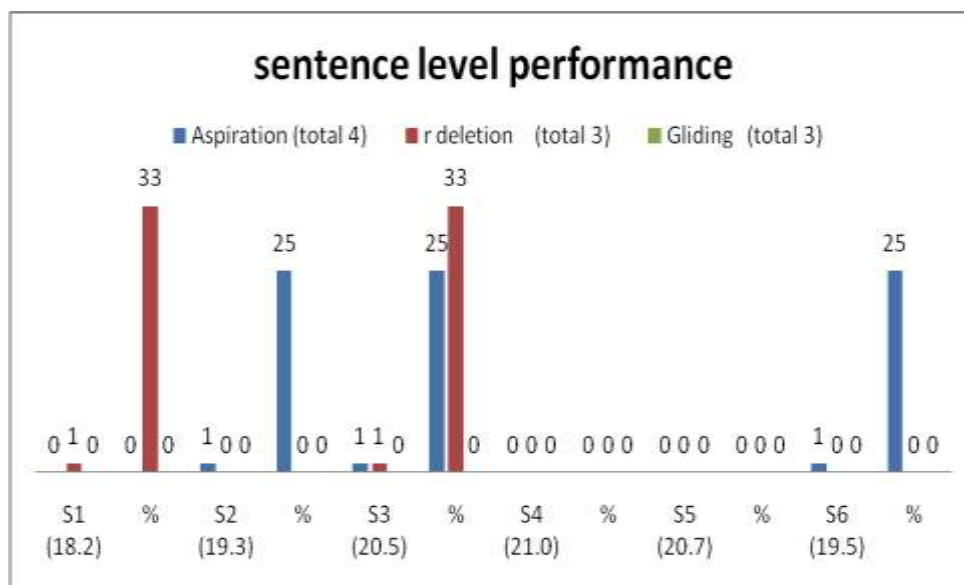


Figure 2 SENTENCE LEVEL

At the sentence level the performance graph was a little different.

- ✓ Out of the six subjects only three subjects were found producing aspiration correctly at least in one case.
- ✓ For 'r-deletion' two subjects made correct answers which was 25 % of the total score provided for this feature.
- ✓ For *Gliding*, the performance was unsatisfactory.

5.0 Acoustic Analysis

In the next phase for the purpose of a more scientific analysis we decided to do an acoustic analysis of the subjects' speech. The softwares

we have used here are Wavepad, PRAAT and trial versions of various TTS (text to Speech) softwares like VERBOSE, TypeIT ReadIT and Balabolka.

5.1 Aspiration at word initial

First we analyzed the words /k^hait/ 'Kite' and /p^hen/ 'Pen' produced by subject 6 in praat window shown in figure 3 and 6 respectively. In the next phase we compared the data with the same word/ phrase produced by a native female British English speaker.

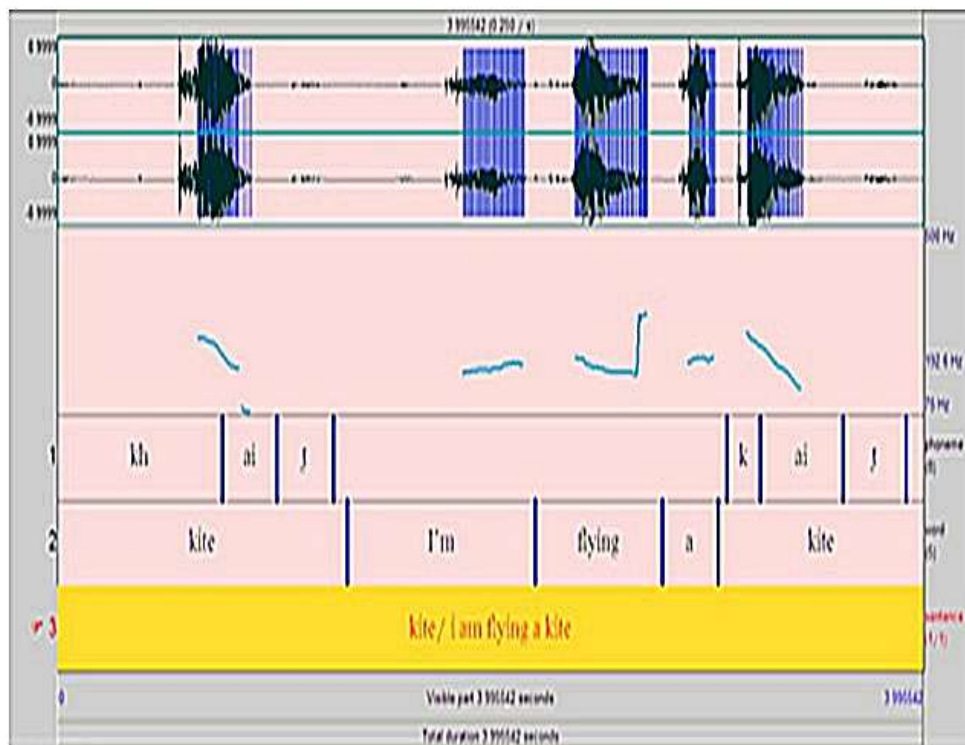


Figure 3 kite as a word and as used in sentence by subject no. 6.

- ✓ The word-initial aspiration is present when the word is uttered in isolation. However when the word is produced in a sentence the aspiration is missing.

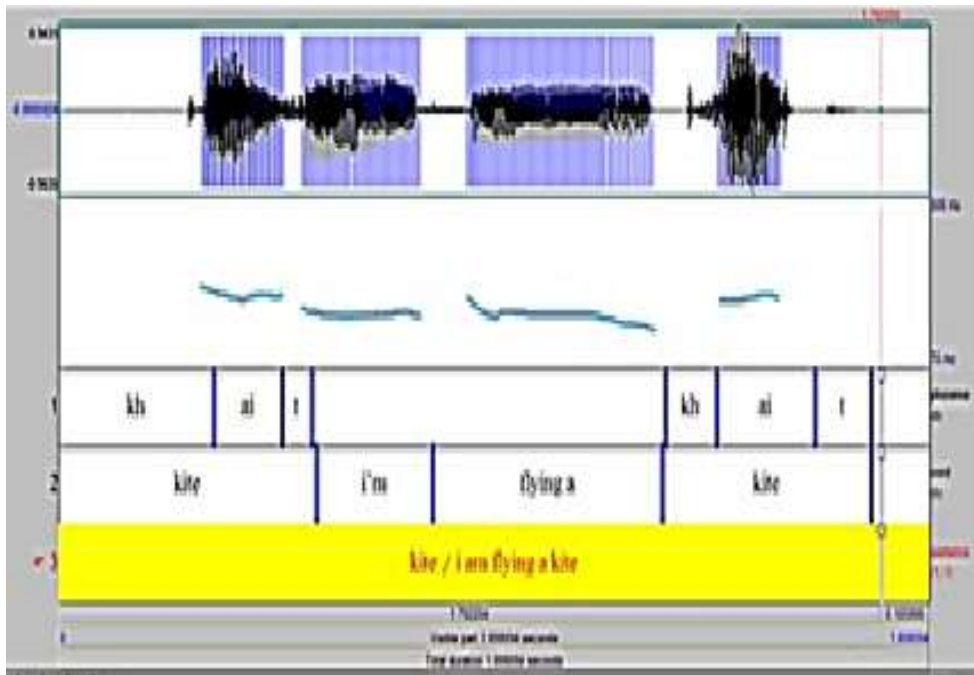


Figure 4 same by a British female speaker

- ✓ Here aspiration is retained in both the word and the word produced in a sentence.

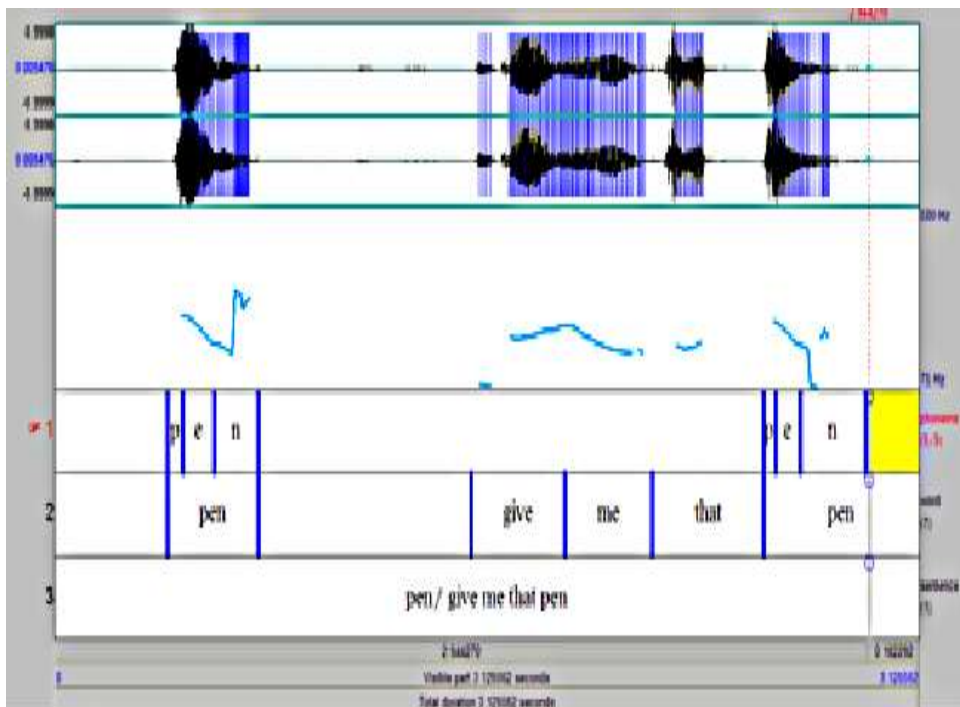


Figure 5 pen by subject number 6.

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For the word pen the actual articulation is /p^hen/ as expected from a speaker of English. In figure five we can see that feature is missing in speaker's utterance. It is not so in case of native speaker of English as seen in figure 6.

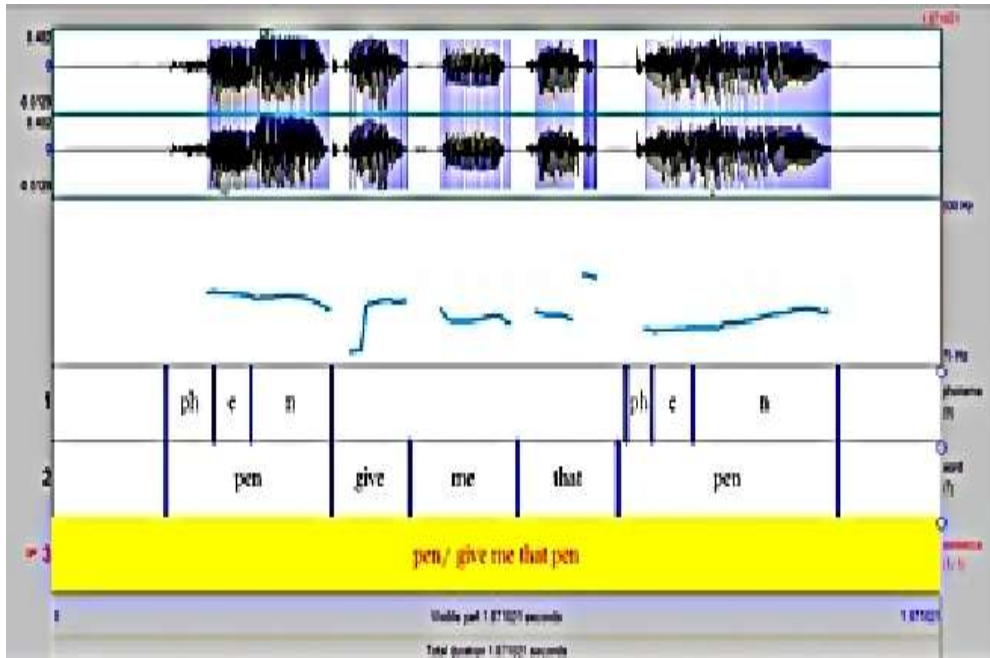


Figure 6 SAME BY A BRITISH FEMALE SPEAKER

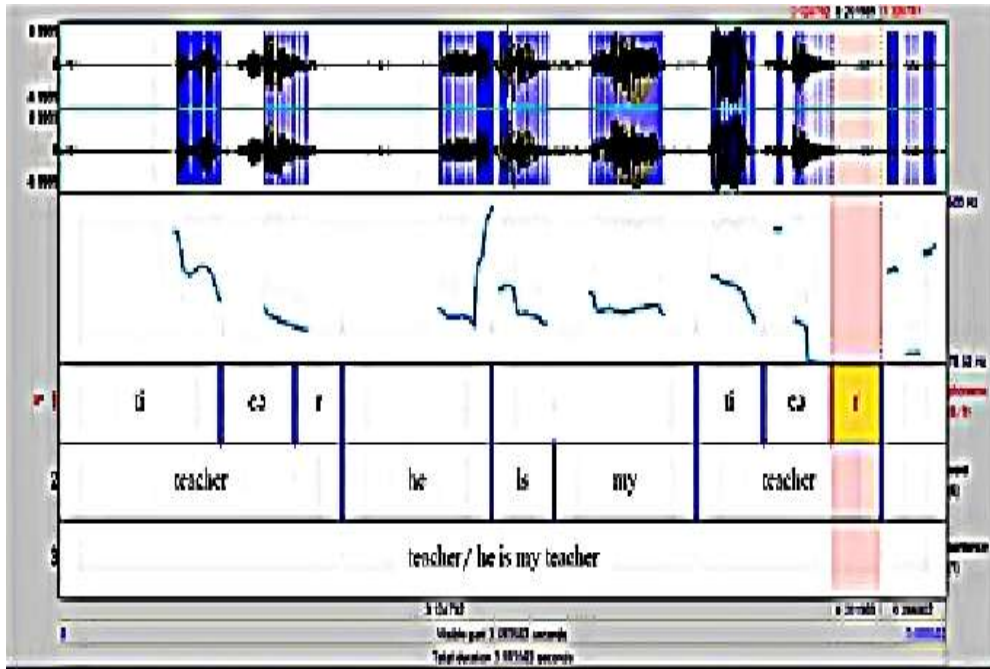


Figure 7 here PRODUCTION OF TEACHER/HE IS MY TEACHER BY SUBJECT 6.

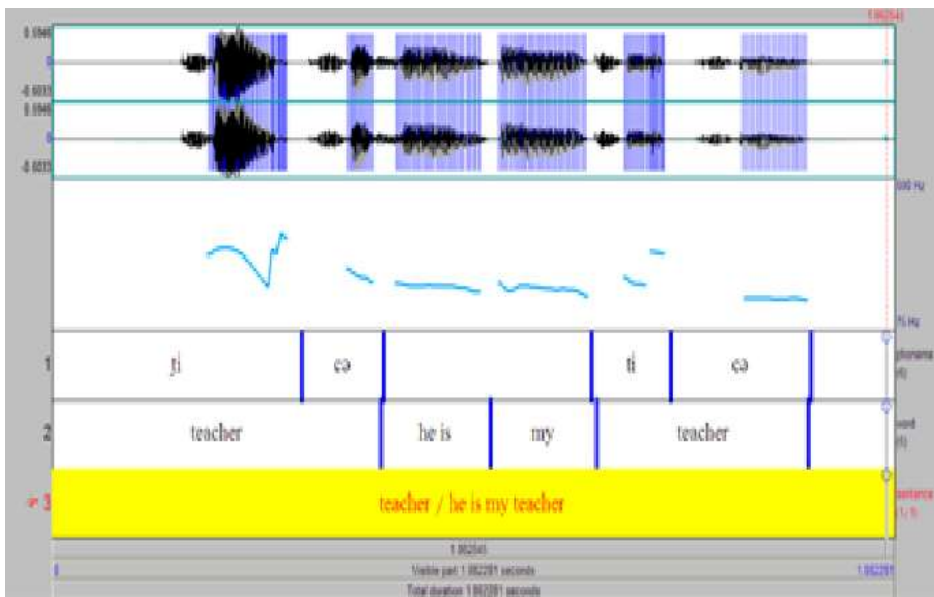


Figure 8 PRODUCTION OF SAME BY BRITISH FEMALE SPEAKER

'R-deletion' in word final position is a must for a speaker of English. In figure 7 we can see that the speaker (subject 6) had not done that. The Language in India www.languageinindia.com 12 : 4 April 2012 Atanu Saha, M.A. and Sakshi Chanana, M.Phil. An Analysis of the Problems and Causes of Errors in Spoken English: A Case Study of the Female Engineering Students in the Age Group of 18-21 Years

sound 'r' is very much present in her speech. When we saw the wave form of a native speaker we learnt the difference.

5.2 Gliding Errors

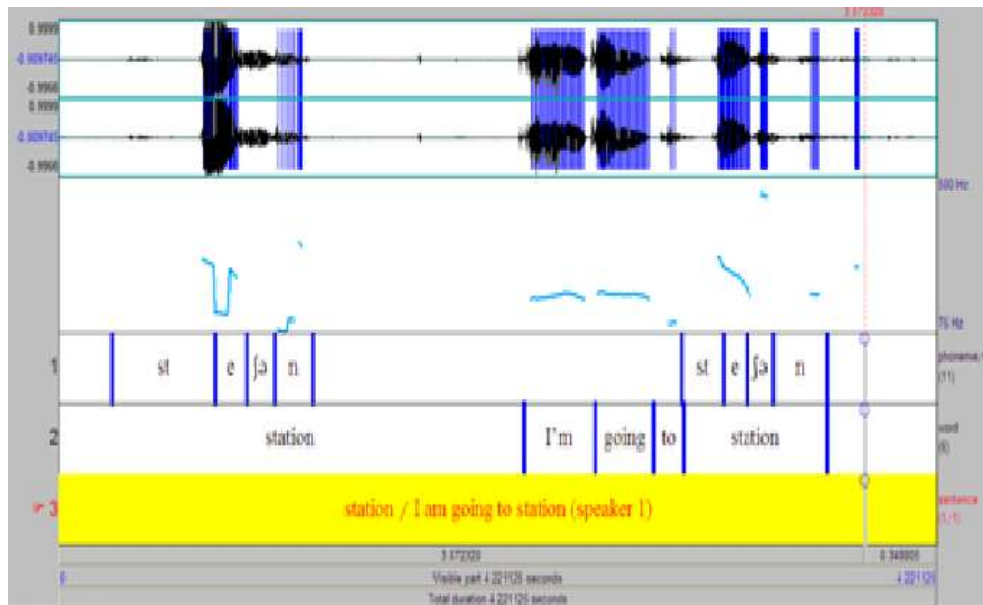


Figure 9 STATION, I AM GOING TO STATION BY SUBJECT 6

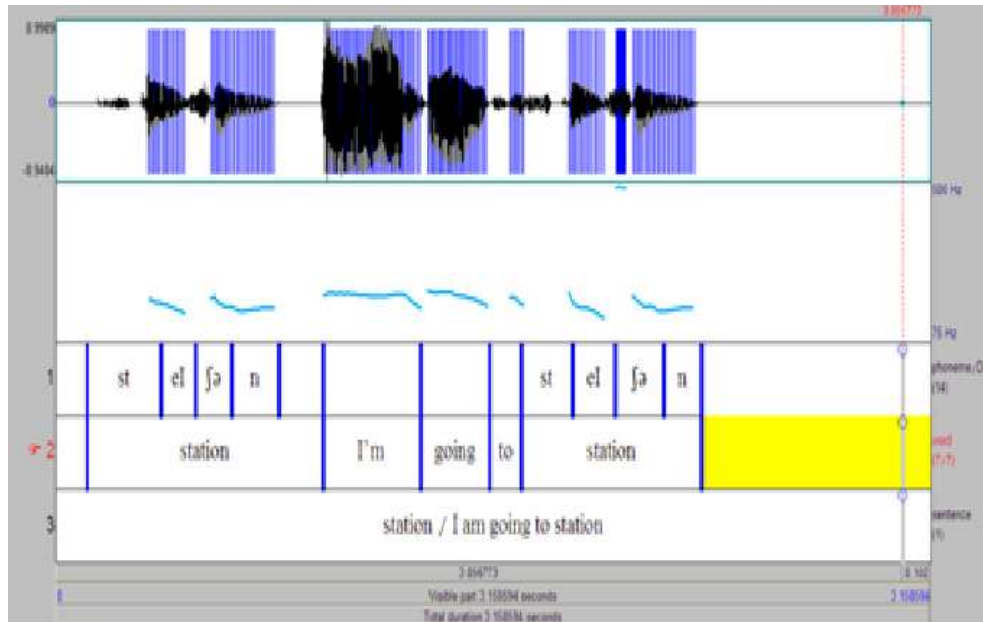


Figure 10 SAME BY A BRITISH FEMALE SPEAKER.

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Again for gliding we saw the same kind of mistake by subject 6. Conventionally station must be pronounced as /steɪʃən/. the eɪ part is known as “diphthongization” or gliding. We noticed that instead of saying /steɪʃən/ our subject produced /stefən/ or for other speakers we found pronunciations like /Istefən/ or /stɪʃən/.

- ✓ Therefore, we can see that among the three features gliding was a severe problem for subjects.

When aspiration was put correctly in words we could figure out that subjects were aware of the rule or perhaps visualized the actual pronunciation. However, their conscious and deliberate effort worked for single word pronunciation but not in a continuous flow of speech like uttering a full sentence.

For r-deletion similar kind of story emerged. We noticed that speakers who were aware of the rule produced the words and sentences correctly.

Thus, it becomes apparent that second language learners commit many mistakes in spoken English. The major cause for these typical errors like aspiration, r-deletion and gliding *may possibly be* attributed to MTI (mother tongue influence). Owing to this influence, many a times other errors like substitution of the ‘s’ sound by ‘ʃ’ and ‘ʒ’ by ‘s’ can also be seen.

5.3 Use of Fillers

The use of fillers by second language learners is yet another problem that besets ELT. Many students tend to use fillers in an attempt either to speak fluent English or to cover up the inadequacy of their lexicon. It is interesting to find that many factors are responsible for the use of fillers. One of the foremost reasons is MTI as the tendency of human

brain is to give first priority to mother tongue as a choice for the thought process itself. While using a second language for communication the brain translates the thought to be expressed from mother tongue to the second language which results in a time gap that is filled by mostly meaningless and impertinent fillers. Further, there is primary influence of mother tongue on the subconscious and therefore an individual automatically retorts to use of mother tongue/fillers while attempting to speak fluently or when the mind cannot conceive of the equivalent word in target language. The other reasons include teaching by grammar-translation method at the primary stage which reinforces this tendency.

5.4 Wrong Sentence Constructions

Faulty sentence constructions often mar spoken English. On account of lack of knowledge or inadequate knowledge about the grammatical rules, students commit the errors in simplest of sentences. Some of the examples are given below:

- I is going to school.
- They had went to school.
- How is you?
- Do you agrees with me?
- Why are you tell a lie?
- I will see you latter.

A good number of students struggle with grammatical rules and cannot understand them in first or second reading. These challenges make it important for any English language teacher to undergo formal training in teaching methods and practices. It is not enough to have sufficient skills in listening and understanding the language. Even a native speaker of the English language requires a methodical and intensive training program to qualify as a good teacher of English as a *foreign language*. Many of the skills like understanding specific problems related to particular regions and

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building basic communication skills in students etc can only be acquired through a formal learning of the same. Furthermore, now-a-days the prolific usage of web lingo by youth has started transgressing its boundaries and is breaking free from IMs (instant messages) and SMSs into the foray of written English as repeated usages of typing-comfortable but technically incorrect language might be establishing the erratic language pattern into their subconscious. Errors lie in not just sentence constructions but correct spellings as well. So much is the ambiguity in this usage that sometimes it becomes very difficult to even correctly comprehend what is being said.

6.0 INFERENCE

We propose the following measures for improvement:

1. Rule based training of English for communication skill building.
2. There should be at least one session when speakers' speech will be recorded and compared with conventional speech of English and results along with graphs must be shown to them. This will help them in understanding and learning the language in a better way.
3. Using film clips and videos to enable students to understand English language better.
4. Reader-response technique should be used.
5. Increase vocabulary of students by using flash cards and other audio-visual aids.
6. Continuous practice.
7. Focus on prescriptive grammar: ensuring that at least there is one grammar class per week to strengthen the basics of students.
8. Knowledge and understanding of IPA symbols.

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Chart of IPA Symbols

Symbol	Example	Symbol	Example
/p/	pea	/ɪ/	pit
/b/	bee	/e/	pet
/t/	tea	/æ/	pat
/d/	do	/ʌ/	cut
/k/	key	/ʊ/	pot
/g/	go	/ʊ/	put
/f/	fat	/ə/	potato, upper
/v/	vat	/i:/	key
/θ/	thin	/ɑ:/	car
/ð/	that	/ɔ:/	law
/s/	sip	/u:/	shoe
/z/	zip	/ɜ:/	girl
/ʃ/	ship	/eɪ/	bay
/ʒ/	measure	/aɪ/	by
/h/	hat	/ɔɪ/	boy
/m/	map	/əʊ/	so
/n/	nap	/aʊ/	now

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/h/	hang	/ɪə/	here
/l/	led	/ɛə/	there
/r/	red	/ʊə/	Tour
/w/	wet	/ʊə/	Tour
/j/	yet	/ʊə/	Tour
/tʃ/	chin		
/dʒ/	gin		

9. Training the students to prefer speaking short sentences which minimises the chances of error.

10. Students should be trained to structure their thoughts in English before speaking them aloud.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The Study thus highlights the major errors and its analysis in spoken English. It can be safely concluded that with a sincere attempt on the part of teacher and learner, the inadequacies in spoken English can be rectified. Any learner bestowed with effective speaking skills can be an asset to the organisation he serves and shall always have a very charismatic personality. Making learners aware of the advantages that accrue to effective and correct spoken English can go a long way in generating the desire on part of learners, to know and learn by heart.

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Appendix 1

ID	Name	Parent's occupation	State	Sex	Age Yy.mm	mother tongue	Languages known other than MT	Socio economic back ground
1	Manisha Jain	Business	Delhi	F	18.2	Hindi	English	High
2	Akansha Shukla	Business	U.P.	F	19.3	Hindi	English	Middle/ Lower middle
3	Neha Som	Ex-defense	U.P.	F	20.5	Hindi	English	Middle/ Lower middle
4	Ritu Sharma	Govt. Employee	U.P.	F	21.0	Hindi	English	Middle
5	Reena Gupta	Business	M.P	F	20.7	Hindi	English	Middle

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6	Swati Bhardwaj	Govt. Service	U.P.	F	19.5	Hindi	English	Middle/ Upper middle
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2,536 words

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