

Exploring the problems of second language learners' English pronunciation: A contrastive analysis of English and Oshiwambo (Oshikwanyama)

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Abstract

English is the official language of Namibia. The majority of Namibians have to learn English as a second language because their mother tongue is either one of the Namibian indigenous languages or a different foreign language. Learning English has been a challenge to many learners and several studies attribute the high failure rate in Namibia to poor proficiency in English. In particular, contrastive analysis studies attribute some of the second language learners' learning difficulties to their first language influence on the target language, English. This study, also a contrastive analysis, focuses on the difficulties which the native speakers of Oshiwambo encounter in learning to speak English, with particular reference to the Ovakwanyama. The study attempts to identify common errors which Oshikwanyama speakers would make in English and establishes the grounds for such errors. Finally, the study makes suggestion for the intervention strategies to remedy the situation.

Key Words: second language learners, English pronunciation, contrastive analysis, Oshiwambo/Oshikwanyama

Introduction

Namibia is a multilingual society. Several African and European languages are spoken in Namibia. These languages can be divided into roughly three language families: the Bantu languages, the Khoesaaan languages, and the Indo-European languages. Fourteen languages have been recognized in Namibia as national languages, including 10 indigenous African languages spoken by 87.8% of the population and 4 Indo-European languages spoken by 11.2% of the population. The 10 indigenous languages include Oshikwanyama, Oshindonga, Rukwangali, Otjiherero, Rugciriku, Thimbukushu, Silozi, and Setswana, all belonging to the

Bantu language group, and Khoekhoegowab and Ju/'hoan which belong to the Khoesan language group. The four Indo-European languages include English, German, Afrikaans, and Portuguese (Frydaman, 2011, pp.181-182).

After independence, the government decided to replace Afrikaans with English as the official language of Namibia. According to Frydaman (2011), the decision to establish English as the sole official language in Namibia was based on an ideology informed chiefly by the sociopolitical circumstances of the country. Learning English has been a challenge to many learners and several studies attribute the high failure rate in Namibia to poor proficiency in English (Fischer, n.d.). Other studies (Avery & Ehrlich, 1996; Cho & Park's 2006; Lado, 1957), based on the Contrastive Analysis (CA) hypothesis, also attribute some of the second language (L2) learners' learning difficulties to their first language (L1) influence on the target language, in this case English. Wilkins (1972) observes that:

When learning a foreign language an individual already knows his mother tongue, and it is this which he attempts to transfer. The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar- in that case we get 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation' – or it may prove unjustified because the structure of the two languages are different in that case we get 'negative transfer' – or interference (p.199).

In CA, descriptions of the features of two languages (L1 and L2) are contrasted to make predictions about the type of difficulty students may have when learning the L2 (Hamakali, 2013). Wardhaugh (1970) proposed two hypotheses of CA, the strong and the weak versions. The strong hypothesis means that difficulties or errors which the native speakers will make in learning an L2 can be predicted through CA. In contrast, the weak hypothesis maintains that CA analyzes the similarities and differences to explain the errors L2 learners make between their native language and the second languages. In other words, the strong hypothesis tends to predict students' errors while the weak hypothesis explains them.

This study focuses on the difficulties which the native speakers of Oshiwambo encounter in learning to speak English with particular reference to the Ovakwanyama. There are vast differences between Oshikwanyama and English. Synchronically, Oshiwambo belongs to the Bantu family whereas English belongs to the Romance family. Oshiwambo consists of 11 dialects namely Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama, Oshikwambi. Oshikwaluudhi, Oshikolonkadhi, Oshimbadja, Oshimbalantu, Oshingandjera, Oshiunda, Oshikwankwa and Oshindombodhola. All these dialects are mutually intelligible. The study attempts to identify common errors which Oshikwanyama speakers would make in English

and establishes the grounds for such errors. In the final analysis the study makes suggestion for the intervention strategies to remedy the situation.

The consonant charts of Oshikwanyama and English

The differences in Oshikwanyama-English phonetic inventories are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below. These classifications help one to identify the Oshikwanyama phonemic consonants non-existent in English.

Table 1

Inventory of English phonemic consonants

Note. Approx. = Approximant. Glot. = Glottal

	Bi- Labial	Labio- dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato- alveola r	Palata	Labio- velar	Velar	Glot.
Stop	p b			t d				k g	ʔ
Nasal	m			n				ŋ	
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ				h
Affricate					tʃ dʒ				
Approx.				l r		j	w		

Source: Roach, (2007, p.xi)

Table 2

Inventory of Oshikwanyama phonemic consonants

	Bi- Labial	Labio- dental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato- alveolar	Palata	Labio- velar	Velar	Glot.
Stop	p b			t d				k	
Nasal		m		n				ŋ	
Trill				r					
Fricative		f v		s	ʃ			x y	h
Affricate					tʃ dʒ				
Approx.				l		j	w		

Note. Approx. = Approximant. Glot. = Glottal

Source: Hasheela (2004, p.17)

The CA of English and Oshikwanyama

It is evident in Tables 1 and 2 that the English phonemic consonants /z/, /g/, /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, and /ʒ/ are non-existent in Oshikwanyama. Ovakwanyama also tend to use either /s/ or /ʃ/, and /r/ or /l/ consistently. This analysis will, therefore, explain how the following phonemic sounds are likely to present pronunciation problems to Ovakwanyama learners of English:

- voiced alveolar fricative /z/
- voiceless alveolar fricative /s/
- voiceless palatal fricative /ʃ/
- voiced alveolar approximant (central) /r/
- voiced alveolar approximant (lateral) /l/
- voiced velar stop /g/
- voiced inter-dental fricative /θ/
- voiceless inter-dental fricative /ð/

- voiced palatal fricative /ʒ/
- voiceless glottal stop /ʔ/

CA prediction of English pronunciation errors by Ovakwanyama

The glottal stop /ʔ/ and clusters

Steinberg (1985) argues that one of the major constraints on sounds in Oshikwanyama is the constraint against closed syllables, i.e. no syllable may end in a consonant. It follows from this that all Oshikwanyama words must end in a vowel. As a result, Ovakwanyama might have difficulty pronouncing the glottal stop /ʔ/. For example, the word *button* [bʌʔn] is likely to be pronounced as [bʌtɔn]. It must be pointed out, however, that in vocative forms Oshikwanyama words can end in a consonant. For example, when a mother or father calls out the name of the child, then child either responds *Taat* or *Meem*, respectively.

Similarly, some Oshikwanyama interjections end in consonants. This is evident in words such as *ish!* *wuh!* In addition, the second syllable in the noun for person in class 1 of Oshikwanyama (such as o-m-ntu) ends in a consonant (Tirronen, 1977). Orthographically, this noun is written as *omuntu*. But *u* is elided in pronunciation. When Oshikwanyama speakers come across the clusters containing liquids or obstruents, they are likely to insert a vowel to adapt the word to the phonological system of Oshikwanyama. Therefore, they would read the word *fridge* [frɪdʒ] as [fɪɪdʒɪ]. However, Ovakwanyama with much exposure to English may leave some clusters intact particularly the one in the middle of the word but the terminal syllable is always converted into the open syllable. For example, an English word *ice cream* [aɪskri:rn] is pronounced as oayiskrima [oayɪskɾɪma] in Oshikwanyama.

The central liquid approximant /r/ and lateral liquid approximant /l/

Since Oshikwanyama has no sound /r/, this sound is likely to be replaced with another liquid /l/. For example, the word *long* [lɒŋ] might be pronounced as *longo* [ɾɒŋgɔ]. According to Mbenzi (2010), the use of /l/ is common in the utterances of the primitive Oshikwanyama people and those who have little exposure to foreign language such as Afrikaans or English. On the other hand, modern Oshikwanyama people, however, tend to use /r/ in their conversation. It must be pointed out that the neighbouring dialects of Oshikwanyama such as Oshikwambi and partly Oshindonga have /r/. One subdialect of the Oshindonga known as Oshinamayongo has /r/. This can be attributed to its proximity to Oshikwambi. Intermingling with speakers of Oshingandjera, Oshikwaluudhi and

Oshikolonkadhi, Oshiunda, Oshindombodhola and Oshikwankwa may be one of the contributing factors to popularisation and extensive use of /r/ in Oshikwanyama dialects in which /r/ is non-existent. It can be assumed that the introduction of contract labour system is also likely to have influenced the introduction of /r/ in Oshikwanyama. The Ovakwanyanya or Aawambo at large who were enlisted for this system were exposed to Otjiherero in which /r/ is very common. Learning to speak Otjiherero was in vogue and was seen as sign of modernity thus the detribalized Aawambo including Oshikwanyama speakers used /r/ in their utterances. Thus, the word *election* [ɪlɛkʃən] might be pronounced as *erection* [ɛrɛkʃɪnə]. Mbenzi (2010) observes the tendency to replace l with r among the Aandonga:

The lateral sound // is pronounced as /r/ by many Aawambo, thus the word *ila* [ɪla] (meaning 'come') is pronounced as /ira/. The use of // is going out of fashion at present. Many Aawambo now use /r/. The possible demise of // can be attributed to the fact that Aambuga (the Oshindonga speaking people who live in the east of Ondonga) who use a 'strong' clear // are stereotyped as witches and wizards and are also considered primitive in their dealings. The stereotypical attitude stems from the praise of the Aambuga which runs: *Ombuga ke na mushona ote ku teya nentolo*. (The Omumbuga no matter how young he/she is, he/she can break one with a loud fart, i.e. he/she can cause you harm through a loud fart). The present generation of the Aambuga, therefore, shy away from the use of /. The other contributing factor to the possible demise of /, is that many speakers of Oshiwambo such as Aakwambi, Aangandjera, Aakwaluudhi, Aakolonkadhi and Aambaanhu inherently use /r/. Speakers of Oshindonga and Oshikwanyama might have been influenced by the speakers of other dialects to drop // in favour of /r/. At present the use of /r/ is associated with modernity and progress whereas the use of // is associated with primitive life and anachronism (p. 11).

Similar observation was also made by Hamakali (2012) among the Koreans that the Korean students have difficulty producing the voiced central liquid /r/ at initial, medial, and final positions (in the words *reader*, *correct* and *tour*, respectively). Hamakali further illustrates that the liquids /r/ and // constitute a single phoneme in the Korean language.

The voiced alveolar fricative /z/

Oshikwanyama learners might have difficulty in pronouncing the sound /z/. They might be unable to pronounce the sound /z/ because it does not exist in their

dialect. They are, therefore, likely to attempt to find the nearest equivalent /dʒ/ to substitute that sound. The word *zeal* /zi:l/ is likely to be pronounced as *jeal* /dʒi:l/. This mispronunciation gives rise to the coinage of a word that does not exist in English thus complicating mutual intelligibility.

The voiceless alveolar fricative /s/

The alveolar sound /s/ does not exist in Oshikwanyama. Orthographically, *s* is always combined with *h*, and represented phonetically with the sound /ʃ/. As a result, Ovakwanyama may pronounce the word *sit* /sit/ as *shit* /ʃit/, or *speak* /spi:k/ as *shpeak* /ʃpi:k/, thus changing the meaning of words or coining non-existent word in English, respectively. However, the speakers of Oshivale, one of the Oshikwanyama sub dialects, tend to elide *h*. Therefore, they would pronounce the word *shine* [ʃain] as *sign* [sain] or *shame* [ʃeim] as *same* [seim]. Hamakali (2013) argues that substitution of certain sounds may affect intelligibility and may confuse the listeners who may misinterpret the word.

The voice velar stop

The sound /g/ does not exist in Oshikwanyama. Therefore, it is likely to be a challenge to an Oshikwanyama speaker. Speakers of the neighbouring dialects such as Aakwambi and Aandonga tend to pre-nasalise the sound /g/. It is likely that Oshikwanyama speakers who share the isoglosses with the speakers of other Oshiwambo dialects may pre-nasalise the sound /g/. Therefore the word *game* [geim] might be pronounced as *ngame* [ŋgeim]. However, some of the fourteen Oshiwambo dialects such as Ovambadja, Aambaanhu and one of the Aakwambi sub-dialects have the sound /g/ in word like *ongaga*, *odagwa*, and *eegulu*, respectively. This implies that the Ovakwanyama who share the same isoglosses with Ovambadja might not have difficulty pronouncing the sound /g/.

The voiced inter-dental fricative /θ/

The Ovakwanyama might have difficulty articulating the sound /θ/ because it does not exist in their dialect. In such cases, a particular sound which does not exist in the first language tends to be substituted with the nearest equivalent sounds (Zhang & Yin, 2009). In other words, one might substitute the dental sound /θ/ with a labio-dental sound /f/. For example, one might pronounce the word *three* [θri:] as *free* [fri:] or *think* [θɪŋk] as *fink* [fɪŋk]. A similar case has been observed among Koreans who replace the fricative /θ/ with the nearest fricative /s/ when they pronounce the word *think* [θɪŋk] as *sink* [sɪŋk] (Hamakali, 2012).

The voiced inter-dental fricative /ð/

The sound /ð/ is likely to be a challenge to Oshikwanyama speakers because it does not exist in their dialect. Alternatively, the voiced dental /ð/ might be substituted with other voiced sounds such as /d/ (Cho & Park, 2006). For example, one might pronounce the word *those* [ðous] as *dose* [dous]. Consequently, such substitution of phonemic sounds may lead to altered meaning of the target word, affecting mutual intelligibility.

The voiced palatal fricative /ʒ/

The voiced palatal fricative /ʒ/ does not exist in Oshikwanyama, therefore, it might be a challenge to Ovakwanyama. As a coping strategy, they are likely to replace the sound /ʒ/ with closest equivalent sound. Ahn (1997; Avery & Ehrlich, 1996; Cho & Park, 2006; Hamakali 2012; Lee, 1999) observed a similar trend among the Koreans who tend to devoice the voiced stop. Similarly, Ovakwanyama might also devoice the voiced palatal fricative /ʒ/ and pronounce it as a voiceless palatal fricative /ç/.

Silent sounds

Oshikwanyama does not have silent sounds except in class 1 where the *u* in the prefix of words such as *omuntu* is silent. Therefore, the word *omuntu* is pronounced as *omntu* [ɔmntu]. In contrast, English has several silent sounds in words such as *psychology*, *hour*, and *honest*. The virtual absence of silent sounds in Oshikwanyama might influence Ovakwanyama to articulate silent sounds in some English words. As a result, Ovakwanyama are likely to pronounce the words *psychology* /saɪkɒlədʒɪ/ as /pɪsaɪkɒlədʒɪ/, *honest* /ɒnɪst/ as /hɒnɪst, and *hour* /aʊə(r)/ as /hauə/.

The vowel charts of English and Oshikwanyama

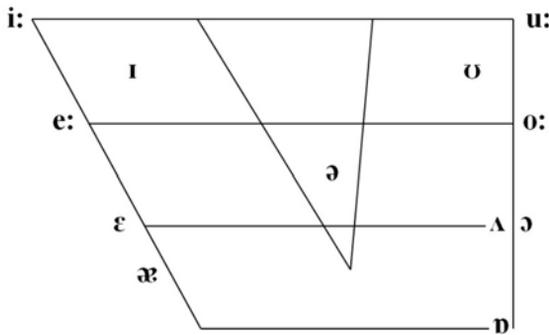


Figure 1. Inventory of English phonemic vowels

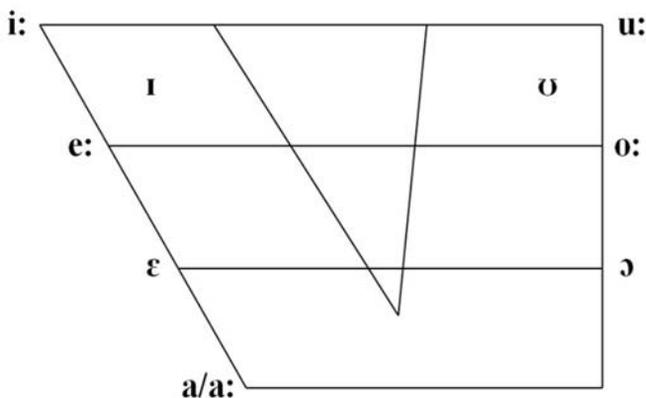


Figure 2. Inventory of Oshikwanyama phonemic vowels

Figure 1 and 2 show that some English vowels do not exist in Oshikwanyama. Therefore Oshikwanyama speakers might experience difficulty in pronouncing such vowels. Alternatively, Ovakwanyama are likely to replace the 'alien' vowels with Oshikwanyama vowels. For example, Ovakwanyama might pronounce the words *man* [mæn] as [man], *pot* [pɒt] as [pɔt], and *camera* [kæmrə] as [kamera]. In Oshikwanyama, vowels do not vary depending on the phonetic environment, but they are consistently pronounced as they appear orthographically. Therefore, Ovakwanyama might apply same rule to English. In addition, long vowels in Oshikwanyama are orthographically represented by double vowels. For example, the word *tuula* [tu:la] (meaning 'open') has double vowels *uu* which always is pronounced as a long vowel [u:]. Thus, Ovakwanyama might also pronounce the words *took* [tʊk] as [tu:k] or *look* [lʊk] as [lu:k].

Based on this analysis, it is likely that Omukwanyama might read the following English text in A, as in B:

A

One of those attacked was Martin Kandjengo, who was attacked and bitten by a creature during earlier morning hours of last Thursday. "It was around 02:00 in the morning when the mysterious animal attacked my dogs. When the dogs' barking died down I went out of my sleeping room to investigate, but I was suddenly attacked from behind. The jaws of the mysterious creature sunk into my right ankle and it felt like the jaws of a big trap.

B

One of **dose attackede wash** Maltina Kandjengo, who **wash attackede and-e** bittene by a cleature during earlier morning **hoursh** of **lasht furshday**. "Iti wash

aloundu 02:00 in de morning when de **myshterioush** animal attacked my **dogsh**. When **de dogsh'** barking died down I went out of my **shleeping loom** to **inveshtigati**, **but-a** I **wash shuddenly** attacked **fлом** behind. **De jawsh** of **de myshterioush cleature shunk** into my **light ankel** and it felt like the **jawsh** of a big **tlap**.

Conclusion

The analysis of this paper reveals that, Ovakwanyama are likely to have difficulty with the articulation of English sounds because of the differences between Oshikwanyama and English. A certain sound that does not occur in Oshikwanyama might pose a challenge for an Oshikwanyama learner of English to produce or articulate. To overcome this problem, they might attempt to substitute those sounds with sounds in Oshikwanyama. The substitution of English sounds with Oshikwanyama sounds makes an utterance unintelligible, or it may change the meaning of the word completely.

Recommendations

Diagnostic samples to establish the sources of error patterns (Luoma, 2004). Therefore, it is important that teachers understand the psychological reason for the occurrences of errors so that they can plan appropriate teaching and learning materials for pronunciation classes.

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